As I See It: Youth Today — Their Mindset, Behaviour and Values

George Boran

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Collection at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Magazine by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.
As I See It

Youth Today—Their Mindset, Behaviour and Values

George Boran CSSp

Young people today constitute the most difficult mission ‘territory’ facing the Church. Effective mission to them involves a two-stage strategy: first, understanding and interpreting what is going on around us; and, second, identifying what we can do about the situation.

A number of the characteristics of postmodern culture exercise a strong influence on the mindset, the behaviour and values of youth. It is worthwhile examining briefly its main tenets.

The sacred

Something which the architects of modernity, building on the twin pillars of reason and science, were unable to predict has occurred: there is a return to the sacred, to some sort of spirituality that will give unity to life and answer the deeper needs of the human person.

There is a thirst for spirituality, but, unfortunately, the institutional church is not satisfying that thirst. Because of this the return to spirituality does not necessarily include a return to church. The spirituality that appeals to many today is privatized, self-centred, superficial, new age, vague and independent of organized religion. Nevertheless, it is an open door that makes it easier to take other steps in the evangelization of young people.

Priority of the subjective

An important aspect of postmodern culture is the shift from a collective to a private ideal. The emphasis is on the subjective, personal problems, feelings, self-esteem, self-realization, confidence, and freedom from traumas. Feeling good has a lot to do with the type of commitments taken on. Youth focus on the problems of daily life.

There are clear symptoms of a generalized apathy or tiredness between youth and social organizations. There is disillusionment with politics and the possibility of changing unjust social structures. There is a notable tendency to retreat to the private
sphere to search for meaning there. These young people do not seek to change society from within, as in the 1960s; they prefer to live on its margin. While a small minority of young people are able to overcome fear and a self-centred attitude, the great majority retreat into the private sphere. Organizations that are largely dependent on volunteers are experiencing a crisis, as their leadership is not being renewed by a new generation.

**Interior silence**

Many young people have difficulty with being alone, and so coming into contact with the deeper self. This is a serious problem. A healthy solitude is the beginning of a process of taking control of one’s own life and building a personality that allows one to escape from dependence on the opinions of the peer group. This is something that those who work with youth need to pay attention to if young people are to have a personal faith in Jesus Christ and discover their Christian vocation in life.

**The gospel message must be presented as an answer to all dimensions of the young person’s life.**

**Relationships**

Youth have an intense desire to establish relationships with one another. Their religious education needs to build on this by creating a welcoming atmosphere, youth communities, and by involving young people in their own faith education.

**Emotions and crisis of values**

Emotions have taken over from reason and science among today’s youth. To the extent that this tendency integrates other dimensions of the human person it is a positive shift. Reason must move over and allow room for emotions, imagination and faith. The gospel message must be presented as an answer to all dimensions of the young person’s life.

Frequently, however, the pendulum swings to the other extreme with the elimination of objective norms for deciding what is right and wrong. “How I feel” has become the major criterion on what is right and wrong. Pleasure is frequently considered an absolute value. The attitude of many young people in today’s culture is: “I create my own morality. If it makes me feel good it is right.” The demands of solidarity and justice are frequently not taken into account. There is no distinction between what is right and what is wrong, between good and evil. Everything goes. There are no objective criteria. Many young people lack a frame of reference to give direction to their lives.

Rejection of the church eliminates a religious tradition and can lead to a value system without roots, one that can easily wither with time. Dostoevsky summed up this attitude in a famous phrase, “If there is no God, then everything is permitted.” For most people values are anchored in religion. It is important to help young people make this connection.

**Church has to be more than the institution**

Youth today are indeed a very difficult mission territory for the church. The article written by George Boran is an eye-opening look into the world of our youth and a glimpse into why they disengage when it comes to being a part of the Church. Our challenge is to begin to develop strategies that will help youth to connect, in a meaningful way, to God. I am not completely sure how we go about developing these programs, but as a teacher and Chaplain, within our Catholic school system I do know we have a “captive audience” and it is a great place to start.

My concern is that, as George states, “There are clear symptoms of genuine apathy or tiredness between youth and social organizations.” I recognize that there is less willingness on the part of many students to get involved because being involved is too much work. However, when you do motivate the students and give them a sense of belonging, they are more than willing to participate. Students so desperately want to belong: they want to belong to a club, to a facebook group, to an MSN network and to many more social organizations. They desire to create relationships with one another.

It is important that we begin to offer them a sense of personal relationship, not only with friends and family, but with God. They must be given genuine experiences of relationship with God, Jesus and each other through the Catholic school community. We are blessed with the opportunity to reach them each and every day that they are present in our classrooms and our buildings. As a Catholic educator it is my responsibility to engage and encourage my students to recognize that they belong not only to the Catholic school community but to the church. We should include them in developing programs within church and school.

George Boran’s article is a great start as we begin to focus on the gifts of youth. Many of them experience a spiritual void in their lives and they fill it with worldly things. Church has to be the place where they connect with Jesus authentically, as a friend. But Church has to be more than the institution. It has to be a place where friendships are forged and where youth feel like they belong.

**Deborha Gove**

*Chaplain, Father Henry Carr Catholic Secondary School, Toronto*

---

This article is Part II of George Boran’s three part series.