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As I See It: Mission to Youth Today

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Some time ago, I was chatting with Fr. Tony, a Dutch missionary who had been in Brazil for over forty years, about the challenges facing the Church today. He described growing up as a young boy in Holland and frequenting his local church, which was always full to overflowing. He then recalled returning home on holidays and perceiving the gradual decrease in numbers in his parish church.

The first to leave were the young people. These were followed by the young married couples, then by their children. Today when Fr. Tony returns to his parish community, he finds a congregation of mainly older people.

This is a familiar story in many First World countries. For some countries the change came earlier. Others are only being ‘hit’ now.

Young people are the first segment of society to challenge the church. Their exodus is an earthquake shaking the institution to its deepest foundations. Many fear that we may be on the brink of losing a generation. It is not that young people attack the church. People who criticize and fight with the church are still interested. Something worse is happening. Young people are leaving the institution and are indifferent to its message. And this indifference is a symptom of deeper causes that need to be urgently addressed.

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.

Understanding and interpreting what is going on

Many practicing parents are deeply hurt and saddened today. They feel guilty. They reproach themselves: “Why haven’t I been able to pass on the faith to my children as previous generations passed it on to me?”

What has changed? A new phenomenon has taken place on a world level: the change from an agrarian and rural economy to an industrial and urban one. In the traditional culture of the past there was a handful of preconditions that favoured faith and made possible a different type of faith. That culture has changed. It was easy to believe because everyone believed. It was a matter of following the tide. Now there is a different culture, a culture that pushes religion to the margin. The tide has changed. To believe now one must swim against the tide.

Mission to young people does not operate in a vacuum, but in the context of the surrounding culture. The minds and values of young people today are increasingly shaped by modern and postmodern cultures and these new cultures no longer need a process of industrialization to spread their message. Today this is done through the modern electronic means of
A golden opportunity

George Boran rightfully insists that the Good News is never proclaimed in a vacuum. We may yearn for the “good old days” when everything was predictable, stable and certain. Yet the spiritual journey is all about life and growth. The exodus of young people from our churches may represent not only the most difficult challenge to our faith, but also the greatest opportunity for us to grow as co-creators with God.

While religion, especially those aspects that hold onto patriarchal authoritarian stances, may be cast to the margins of our culture, a fresh openness to the sacred dimension of life, and a yearning and appreciation of our deep connection with all the earth’s people and the cosmos itself permeate our time. I can’t help but feel the presence of the Spirit here. We may have grown up with a map of the world that clearly demarked borders between people and placed ourselves at the centre of the Universe. The youth of today, however, are captivated by the picture of the fragile beauty of our earthly home from space. It is an earth without borders that divide “us from them,” “men from women,” “people from the rest of creation”. A new global consciousness is stirring into life.

When asked whether the unchurched students he teaches are unbelievers, Frank O’Neill replied (Spiritan, February 2007) that the term “unchurcher” does not apply to these teenagers. Many who say that they don’t believe or don’t know are in the process of letting go of a childhood image of God that is too small to sustain them, and they haven’t yet acquired another image.

I believe the whole church at this moment is experiencing the same growth pains. Could it be that in our post modern world a bigger God is breaking out of the limiting strait-jacket we have imposed in our craving for certainty and ownership? The exodus of young people is not the worst thing that could happen to us but a golden opportunity to grow together and give birth to a bigger God of the Universe. They are calling us into a new future and their struggles hold the key to the unfolding of God’s dream for creation. They not only represent “the most difficult missionary territory”, they belong in the very centre of our churches. The very best of our resources and inherited wisdom need be unleashed to assist the working of the Spirit among them.

Kathy Murtha, Co-ordinator, Scarborough Missions Retreat Centre

communication in both developed and developing countries. An understanding of these cultures is the key to understanding young people and helping them on the road to Christian commitment.

A different type of faith

This cultural change requires a different type of faith. It calls for a transition from a cultural Christianity to a Christianity of personal faith. Faith can no longer be reduced to Sunday Mass, to a list of dogmas, to a moral code or to solving social problems. It must be something richer and more challenging. Faith is especially an encounter with a person, the person of Jesus Christ. And the acceptance of Jesus means the acceptance of his teaching, of his lifestyle, his world vision and his formula for human happiness.

To understand the power of culture to shape mentalities, values and behaviour patterns, let us look briefly at rural, modern and postmodern cultures.

Rural Culture

In a rural, pre-modern culture religion is at the centre and gives meaning to everything. A hierarchical structure is emphasized; there is consensus among civil and church leaders on a common set of values; questioning is not encouraged; obedience is an important value; the sacred powers of the priest are emphasized.

Most of our vocations have come from a rural or pre-modern culture. Much of the leadership in the church is still working out of a rural, pre-modern worldview.

Although many young people in developing countries are born into families with a pre-modern outlook, they themselves are attracted to and fascinated by the flashing lights of contemporary cultures. A pastoral approach that proposes to freeze young people in a pre-modern cultural setting will not work.

Today in many places there is a return to a clerical, paternalistic, authoritarian model of Church that is progressively sideling a community/ministerial model. This trend constitutes one of the important obstacles to evangelizing young people who have inbuilt antibodies against any pastoral approach that fails to integrate the values of modernity.

To believe now one must swim

In this new context the awareness of human autonomy and secularization are important values. The dictatorship of theology over science is no longer acceptable. A church that demands submission and attempts to regulate people’s lives in their minimum details meets with very little receptivity. An institution that fails to integrate women on an equal plane with men also encounters increasing resistance. Young people reject a church that is seen to be on the side of oppression and ignorance. The Second Vatican Council’s Church in the Modern World had the merit of proposing the end of a triumphant, authoritarian and clerical model of church. It proposed a church that welcomes everything which is truly human in the surrounding culture.

Modern Culture

A modern culture pushes religion from the centre and replaces it with economics, reason and science. Important values are democracy, dialogue, the pursuit of happiness, transparency, individual rights, secularization, freedom, sexuality, the equality of women.

The thinkers who helped give birth to this new world of modernity were against religion and condemned by the church.

Postmodern Culture

Alongside modern culture, still very much present in our schools and universities, a postmodern culture exercises great influence on the mindset, values and
Teens have not chosen their milieu

Fr. Boran’s analysis of the current post modern culture, his description of the needs and values of young people today correspond to my own experience with teens and also with my five children who are now adults, ranging in age from 36 to 27. He has avoided the “blame syndrome” which so often marks discussions about youth and the church. He notes the realities that exacerbate that divide.

Teens have not chosen their milieu. They don’t design the programs and advertising that try to define them. They don’t want to have parents who work so hard they are not available to them. Most don’t want to be selfish and self-absorbed.

The priority of the subjective, the importance of relationship and the centrality of emotions are at work in the lives of teens. A sense of the sacred, crises of values, and struggles with the issue of commitment I see in my children as pursuits of the mid-20s to 30s.

Many are idealistic

Youth today are for the most part decent, caring people. Many are idealistic. The rare few may find hope and faith in a personal relationship with Christ. Most are more concerned by the suffering of the small child in the third world, and by the gross discrepancies in the distribution of the world’s resources. They are still passionate about justice. They can find the face of Christ in so many situations.

Their thirst for justice and compassion is the route we must follow to guide them to whatever Church is to become. We need to ask where the Spirit is leading us through our teens.

Jean Vanier tells us that the most important human need is belonging. For my generation that belonging included the Church. Today’s teens belong to each other. But they still need that community of caring others who will guide them and challenge them. We can’t be that until we know who they are.

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against the tide.