

YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT CATECHESIS

The Missionary Nature of Youth Catechesis Bob Rice

He sat in my office, his body tense with anxiety. He had years of training in theology, but nothing had prepared him for this. As he spoke to me, his eyes darted around the room, as if he was hoping to find some kind of answer written on the walls.

"How do I reach them?" He asked with such sincerity that tears were almost welling up in his eyes. "I know I'm telling them about the faith. I know what they are hearing is true. But it's like I'm speaking a foreign language." And then he looked up at me, hopeful that I could answer his important question:

"How can I talk to teens about the faith in a way that they will listen to?"

His experience (and frustration) is hardly unique. Many adults who try to pass the faith on to youth feel like they are speaking to people from a different planet. The *General Directory for Catechesis* tells us that to pass the faith on to young people, we "must adopt a *missionary dimension* rather than a strictly *catechumenal* dimension." (GDC 185) As catechists to youth, we cannot envision ourselves as people who are teaching a group of "little adults". Instead, we must view ourselves as missionaries to a foreign culture.

Here are a few important things we need to do if we want to be effective in reaching youth:

We enter their world

"To the Jew, I became a Jew... to the Greek I became a Greek," wrote St. Paul. (1 Corinthians 9:20) So to the teen must we become teens? The answer is yes, but not in the way many think. St. Paul was not suggesting that we become duplicitous and behave like someone we are not. He was talking about so fully entering their culture that we are seen by them as "one of them". When you are aware of what they watch on TV or know their popular music and use that in your catechesis, their eyes become wide with shock and suddenly you've got their attention. But don't just try to find some cultural clichés so you can look "cool". To teach the faith, we must become students of their culture.

This can't be done at a distance. We have to get to know them. We need to go where they are. See them in a sports game. Go to their school play. Show up at something important to them. Stay committed to this, and over time they will start to see you as a part of their world. They will come to know that you care, and they will be more open to listening to what you have to say. As St. John Bosco was fond of saying, "If you love them, they will follow you anywhere."

We learn their language

The GDC acknowledges that, "One of the difficulties to be addressed and resolved is the question of 'language' (*mentality, sensibility, tastes, style, vocabulary*) between young people and the Church." (GDC 185) Language doesn't mean "slang," as if saying "Jesus is present in the Eucharist, yo!" solves the problem. By entering into their culture we can speak from their culture in a way they understand. It means we are sensitive to the "hot topics" of their world and handle them in a delicate, pastoral way. It also means that we can use the voices of their culture (music, media, movies) and show them where Christ is (and is not) present.

And we must be careful to explain the faith using a vocabulary that they can understand. Many students are shocked when I suggest that it is not always the best for teens

to use direct quotes from the catechism. The catechism is for catechists, and was not meant necessarily as a text for those to be catechized. The language it uses is for educated adults, and not 14 year olds. Sometimes it works, but more often than not a good catechist will need to find a way to express the truths of the Catechism with a language that isn't over their heads.

We be ourselves

Teens can sense fake people a mile away. As I mentioned before, we don't need to become a teenager to minister to teenagers. We enter into their culture and we learn the language they speak, but we must always remain true to ourselves. This is essential because there is something about who we are that will be a blessing to them. After all, that is why God called us into this ministry in the first place! They don't need another teenage friend, they need a loving adult like you who will listen to them and encourage them into intimacy with Jesus Christ.

The Second Person of the Trinity became flesh and entered into our world. The Living Word used our human language to preach His message of salvation. And though He was fully human, it did not make Him less divine. Christ is our model of missionary work, because it is through *His* missionary work with *us* that we are saved. So let us *keep our eyes fixed on Jesus*, and rely on the Holy Spirit to accomplish what may seem, for some, impossible: sharing Christ to the culture of youth.

BOB RICE

Bob Rice is an Assistant Professor of Theology at Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio where he teaches classes on Biblical Catechetics, Evangelization, and Youth Ministry. He is also an author, musician, and internationally sought after speaker for youth and young adults. You can find out more about him at bob-rice.com.

