

# YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT CATECHESIS

## Ministering to Millennials

Bob Rice asks what cultural reference-points we use in our youth ministry

**I**f imitation is the highest form of flattery, then my youth minister should have felt pretty good about himself when I started doing full-time ministry.

I was a teen in the late 80s, and after college found myself working for a parish in the mid 90s. I mostly did what I experienced as a youth. My subconscious mantra was, 'If it worked back then, it will work now!' So I played the games we used to play and sang a lot of the same songs. We weren't wearing jean jackets, the girls didn't have bangs, and we weren't jamming out to Boy George and the Culture Club - but other than that it could have come right out of 1987.

Many of the cultural references I used were from *my* childhood, not theirs. I almost had a heart attack when I realized that 75% of my teens had never seen Star Wars. As opposed to updating my analogies, I immediately declared the next Sunday a movie night, and you can guess which science fiction epic I made them watch.

### Ministering to the right person

This went on for a few years until I realized I had fallen into one of the most common traps that plague people who work with youth and young adults: I wasn't ministering to them as they were, I was ministering to me as I was.

My first move to correct the problem was superficial: use updated movie clips and song lyrics. It wasn't enough. It is a mistake to think that teens are the same as we were except they watch different movies and prefer different styles of music and fashion. That is just the surface.

As I train those who work with youth, one of the hardest things to impress upon them is that *they were never like the teens of today*, just as their parents weren't like them. When we act like we've 'been there, done that', it comes off as condescending. To be sure, there are some commonalities involved for any human being going through adolescence. We remember the growth spurts, the awkwardness of puberty, and so on. But culturally speaking, they are very different.

For example, when I was in high school, many youth groups focused on what could be called 'trickle-down' ministry.

They would target the most popular kid in school, like the captain of the football team or the head cheerleader. If they came, they were sure to bring the rest of the school with them.

### Becoming a student

Not so today. For the Millennial generation, there is no longer one dominant social group that all the others look to for guidance. Instead, youth are broken into numerous sub-cultures. The days of jocks ruling the school went out with the 90s. And yet I still find youth ministers who try to apply this failed formula.

There is not enough room here to list all the differences between then and now, and there are many excellent books on the subject (I recommend *Youth Culture 101* by Walt Mueller). The important thing is that we don't use our own preferences or experiences as a litmus test to what we think will or won't work for teens today. Just because something is suggested that you would have hated as a teen doesn't mean it will fail. Just because you loved it doesn't mean it will succeed.

### Evangelize culture, right to the very roots!

The answer lies in becoming a student of the culture of youth. Research it. Ask questions about it. Talk to teens about it. Don't just find out what they like, but pay attention to how they think and interact. The challenge in bringing the gospel to the culture of youth is the same as with any culture: 'What matters is to evangelize man's culture and cultures not in a purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots.' (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*)

We must be familiar enough with their culture to be able to use it to proclaim the gospel message. 'In order that they may be able to bear more fruitful witness to Christ... let (Christians) gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lay hidden among their fellows.' (Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*) The Word is hidden among them! And that means we have to put effort into searching for it. St. Paul exhorts us to 'test everything and hold on to what is good, and shun every form of evil.' (1 Thess 5:21) The key to effective youth catechesis does not lie in our past but in their present.

Shall we abandon our experiences all together? No, of course not. '(God) supports us in every hardship so that we are able to come to the support of others in every hardship of theirs because of the encouragement that we ourselves have received from God.' (2 Cor 1:3-4) God has given us many experiences that are to be used to encourage others. But until we find ways to insert ourselves into the world of youth and share those experiences in a way they can comprehend, we will seem antiquated, outdated, and irrelevant.

### 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.

