

Plugging teens into the faith: A how-to guide

Some call them the iGeneration. Others prefer Generation Z, Pluralists or post-Millennials.

Sociologists and marketing experts have yet to reach a consensus on what to call the children of Generation X – today's teens, tweens and tots. But they have picked a start date for the newest emerging generation: 1997.

They've also identified a few defining characteristics: They are perpetually plugged into technology, they pride themselves on being socially conscious, and they're the least religious generation in American history.

For the Catholic Church in particular, that last bit of news is cause for concern.

As a 2010 study by the Barna Group found, the religious practices of the average American teenager have rapidly declined over the past decade, with the religious practices of Catholic teenagers declining significantly more than that of their Protestant peers.

More specifically, Catholic teens today are less likely than Catholic teens in 1997 to attend church, Sunday school or small-group meetings. They're also less inclined to pray, donate money to their parish or read about their faith and far more reluctant to talk about their faith with those who don't share it.

What explains the continued decline in religious belief and practice among today's Catholic youth? Who is this rising generation? And what can both parents and parishes do to arrest the free fall in belief that increasingly defines the iGeneration?

Our Sunday Visitor put those questions to some of the most experienced and effective youth ministers serving the Church today.

What they believe



In his 2005 book [“Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers”](#) (Oxford University Press, \$17.95), Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith coined the term “moral therapeutic deism” to define the religious beliefs of today’s typical teen.

Nine years later, the Augustine Institute’s director of youth ministry and evangelization, Jim Beckman, says the term still holds true for teens in general and many Catholic teens in particular. As Beckman explained it, moral therapeutic deism combines the vision of God held by deists of old (a far-off God, removed from his creation) with the moral relativism of the post-modern world.

“The idea is that we need to be good people who live good lives, but the definition of ‘good’ is vague,” Beckman said. “It’s more oriented around feeling good than being good.”

Likewise, with staggeringly high numbers of teens rejecting the idea of absolute truth – one recent study by Protestant apologist Josh McDowell put it as high as 93 percent – most believe it is up to individuals to determine what defines “feeling good.”

“You could almost say they’re moral individualists, rather than moral relativists,” said Brian Kissinger, who has spent 10 years serving as a youth minister in Pittsburgh and northern Virginia. “They’re completely comfortable holding conflicting ideas in tension with one another.”

That applies to their friends’ ideas, with the members of America’s most diverse generation accustomed to spending time with those who hold different religious, political or cultural beliefs.

And it applies to their own ideas.

“You see teens who proclaim traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs at church, then act in a completely contrary way when they’re at school or out on Friday night,” Kissinger said.

“Teens did that 10 and 20 years ago too, but we saw it as being two-faced. Now, there’s not even an awareness of the disconnect.”

What makes for effective parish youth ministry?

It's not expansive youth facilities with basketball courts, media rooms and concert halls. Nor is it youth ministers who know how to play the guitar and could moonlight as stand-up comedians. Not that there isn't something to be said for those things. As Protestant communities have learned, smart packaging and excellent facilities can help attract teens to youth events. But those details are the icing, not the essence of a successful youth ministry program. They are not essential to engaging the iGeneration.

So what is?

According to the Catholic youth ministers from around the country to whom OSV put that question, effective Catholic youth ministry requires four key components.

Personal

- It calls teens to a personal relationship with Christ, helping them understand the Catholic Faith, first and foremost, as an intimate relationship with Christ and his Church, more than a mere list of rules.
- It seeks to meet teens' hunger for intimacy by building meaningful relationships within the youth group and parish.
 - It creates small, faith-sharing groups, where teens can learn to let themselves be known and where adults can more readily listen to the teens' struggles and questions, witness to Christ through their actions and help teens identify their gifts and charisms.
 - It doesn't presume the struggles of iGeneration teens in general are the struggles of one group of teens in particular. It listens, then responds.
- It reaches out to teens as individuals, issuing personal invitations to participate in events and not just relying on Facebook invites.
- It recognizes that it takes time to build relationships and earn trust, so it seeks to maintain continuity by retaining effective youth ministers and volunteers.

Sacramental

- It helps teens engage more fully and fruitfully in the Church's liturgy.
 - It provides regular opportunities throughout the year for confession.
- It brings teens to a face-to-face encounter with Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, providing them with ample time for silent prayer and reflection in Eucharistic adoration.
 - It seeks to include parish priests in as many events and activities as possible.
- It seeks to help the whole family, not just individual teens, encounter Christ more fully in the Church's sacramental and liturgical life.

Formative

- It forms teens in the teachings of the Faith, helping them grow in their knowledge of Church doctrine through effective catechesis.
- It forms teens in Christian prayer, teaching them what prayer is, how to pray, and providing them with opportunities to pray both as part of a community and on their own.
- It forms teens in Christian living, helping them see how the teachings of the faith are applied to the circumstances of everyday life.
 - It forms teens relationally, teaching them how to build friendships, listen to others, make sacrifices and communicate who they are in face-to-face interactions.
 - It forms teens culturally, helping them better understand how to use technology and discern messages in the media.

Challenging

- It doesn't treat teens as the parish work force, including them in parish events simply to do the set-up and clean-up work.
 - It doesn't treat retreats or youth group events as items on the pre-confirmation checklist.
 - It addresses the hard questions and hard issues teens face.
 - It doesn't water down the Church's teaching or soft-peddle the Christian faith.
 - It issues specific challenges relevant to teens' lives, calling on them to stop watching pornography, avoid gossip, not cheat in school, be kind to those who others abuse, date chastely, dress modestly, give to the poor, support their parish and help their parents.
 - It never wastes time. It strives to make every activity, even games and ice-breakers, purpose-filled.
 - It encourages them to serve the less fortunate in person, going on mission trips, organizing activities that bring them in contact with the local poor and taking them on visits to hospitals and nursing homes.

What they fear

For the middle- and upper-class members of the iGeneration, life has always been a competition. Soccer, ballet, chess, drama, swimming, fencing, running – almost none of it is just for fun or enrichment anymore. Today, parents shell out big bucks for lessons and programs, which almost always come with high-pressure recitals, games and meets.

“It’s all oriented toward the college application,” Kissinger said. “Everything has become a competition, and if they’re not excelling at one thing, they’ve got to find something else.”

That’s why those as young as 10 or 12 learn to fear failure like they fear little else.

“Some very well-intentioned people put an inordinate amount of pressure on kids,” says Angela Gaughan, longtime youth minister at St. Bernard’s Catholic Church in Pittsburgh. “So many young people today are expected to be good at everything. You’ll see these young men and women sitting in front of the Blessed Sacrament with their head in their hands because they’re so confused. They don’t know what to do.”

Along with that, across the socioeconomic spectrum, today’s teens also demonstrate fear of commitment.

“I think that’s where this desire to separate Jesus from the Church or be spiritual without being religious comes from,” Kissinger said. “The relationship between husband and wife is supposed to reflect Christ’s faithful commitment to the Church. But the institution of marriage is in shambles. How can kids want to commit to the Faith, let alone another person, when poor examples of commitment surround them?”

How they see themselves

On the upside, the iGeneration is as socially conscious, if not more, than its generational predecessors.

“Teens want to be part of something bigger than themselves, and they think of themselves as being advocates for change,” said Christopher Bartlett, who has worked in youth ministry on both the diocesan and parish levels in Texas for 12 years.

On the downside, however, their social activism isn’t all that active.

“This generation is more satisfied with being advocates on social media than in the streets,” Bartlett explained, noting that many view “likes” on Facebook or re-tweets on Twitter as the equivalent of visits to soup kitchens.

Similarly, just as social media gives teens the feeling of having advocated for change without working for change, it also gives them a sense of knowing more than they do.

“The Internet gives them access to information that’s a mile wide and an inch deep,” Beckman said. “Only they don’t know it’s an inch deep. They’re very confident in the knowledge they have and just assume they can do another Google search if they need more.”

That confidence goes hand in hand with what many perceive as a sense of entitlement.

“We saw this with the Millennials and we’re seeing it even more with their successors,” Beckman explained. “They believe themselves deserving of things they don’t really deserve.”

Most, including Beckman, lay the blame for that in large part on “helicopter” parents, who shower material gifts on their children, are increasingly prone to interfering in both school and sports (in the process shielding their children from the consequences of their actions) and who shy away from assigning chores at home or requiring teens to work at after-school jobs.

At least some blame, however, also goes to coaches, who

stopped awarding trophies for excellence and started awarding them for participation, and schools, who now build self-esteem lessons into the curriculum, as well as a media culture that tailors itself to teens' every preference.

Explained Kissinger, "They don't have to listen to top 40 radio anymore; they can listen to Pandora. They don't have to watch network TV; they can stream Netflix. These things teach teens that they're the center of the universe – that life will tailor itself to their tastes and schedules."

What they lack

The iGeneration may have hundreds of Facebook friends and Twitter followers, but for all their connections in virtual worlds, many struggle to form meaningful connections in the real world.

"They can post the most intimate details online, but can't have a heart-to-heart conversation with someone face to face," said Kissinger.

In part, he continued, that's social media's fault, which has made it easier for teens to protect themselves from messy, real world interactions, where rejection is more immediate and conflict has greater consequences.

A larger chunk of responsibility, however, lies with the adults in the children's lives, adults who have allowed teens to be plugged in almost since birth, put smart devices in their hands during elementary school and who don't engage with them regularly in the home.

"Parents by and large aren't talking to their kids," Beckman said. "The average 13- to 18-year-old spends nine minutes a week in meaningful conversation with their parents."

It's not just meaningful relationships, however, that teens lack. It is meaning in general.

“For years, life has been presented to them as a Choose Your Own Adventure story,” said Kissinger. “They’re not taught that there’s a purpose to their existence, that there’s a reason they’re alive. Teens are pretty creative, but none of us are creative enough to make up a meaning for our life that’s going to last. That leads to a real struggle to hope.”

It also, said Gaughan, leads to “a hunger for truth.”

“They want something deeper and more real than society is giving them,” she explained. “They’re not interested in fluff, and they tune you out immediately if you’re not being honest. They don’t want you to sugarcoat things.”

What reaches them

On one hand, the defining characteristics of the iGeneration make it harder for parents and parishes to evangelize and catechize teens.

After all, it’s difficult to call teens to a relationship with Christ when they don’t know what a relationship is.

It’s difficult to teach them the Faith when they think they know all there is to know.

It’s difficult to help them integrate the Gospel into their everyday life when they don’t see the conflict between what the Church teaches and how their peers behave.

Lastly, it’s difficult for them to appreciate God’s love and mercy when they see both as their birthright, not as gracious gifts no one deserves.

Yet, as Beckman pointed out, “All those poverties aren’t just characteristics; they’re human needs. You can’t survive without intimacy. You’re going to struggle without a foundation of truth. If everything is relative, how do you navigate the world?”

Accordingly, he continued, what reaches today's teens is identifying the real needs they have – the needs that aren't being met by the culture – and orienting formation around them.

That requires what evangelical Protestants call “discipling” and what Beckman calls “active mentoring.” It entails establishing real, authentic relationships with teens; identifying and naming their gifts and talents; and treating them with respect, but also gently leading them to question the culture; being honest and admitting struggles; modeling what the Christian life looks like; and not pulling any punches when it comes to teaching truth.

“The teens like it that the Catholic Faith has answers to the hard questions,” Gaughan said.

“It's comforting for them to know that part of our life as Catholics is that we have the answers. They thrive on that.”

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