

Hopeful apostolates

Despite the disheartening numbers that show more and more young people are leaving the Catholic Church and rejecting faith altogether, there are a number of organizations that have dedicated their time and resources to reaching this demographic. Not only do they reach out to the “nones,” but they provide rich experiences of faith for those who want to know more and connect them with others across the country and in their own communities. These apostolates are driving forces in forming a faithful group of dedicated young Catholics, giving hope for the future of the Church.

Word on Fire

Among these organizations is the apostolate founded by Bishop Robert Barron – Word on Fire Catholic Ministries. This global nonprofit uses media to spread the Gospel to all demographics – young and old, practicing and fallen away Catholics, and anyone to whom the message of Jesus Christ has not yet reached. Through articles, books, study programs, podcasts, YouTube videos and educational video series – including “Catholicism,” his award-winning documentary that addresses the truth, goodness and beauty of the Church – Word on Fire is a clear resources for those discovering the Faith or wanting to go deeper.

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However, even with his large following on social media, Bishop Barron and his team realize that they cannot reach everyone, no matter how effectively they use their tools of ministry. Instead, others must be trained in the Word on Fire movement. To succeed in this effort, Bishop Barron launched the Word on

Fire Institute, which will form these leaders “to effectively engage those on the existential peripheries,” such as the “nones,” explains the institute website.

“We need a vast, well-formed army of evangelists who encourage one another, strive after a radical relationship with Christ through the sacraments, and leave their doorstep every single day ready to proclaim Christ in the culture,” said Jared Zimmerer, the director of the Word on Fire Institute. This movement is growing and continues to reach the far ends of our unaffiliated world.

Young Catholic Professionals

For almost a decade, Young Catholic Professionals has engaged those in their 20s and 30s by providing a connection with their Catholic peers and supporting them in their demanding careers. Inspired by their patron, St. Joseph the Worker, the nonprofit helps young Catholics balance their lives, encouraging moments of stillness and prayer amid a world of constant stimulation and busyness.

“It is very evident that young people today desire beauty, unity, truth, deeper conversations, real friendships and meaningful goals. We know that these are part of our human nature. These desires have been placed in our hearts by our Creator, and they will never go away,” said Sophia Kanzelberger, chapter support coordinator on YCP’s national staff. “YCP membership provides professional, spiritual and personal resources in the form of executive mentorship, spiritual guidance and life coaching, as well as access to a national network of peers.”

“It wasn’t until I joined YCP that I realized how unhappy and lost I truly was,” said Michael Kelly, a YCP member. “I was numb, simply going through the motions with no purpose or direction. The friends I’ve met through YCP make me want to be the best possible version of myself, day in and day out. They

provide the encouragement I need to grow as a disciple for Christ.”

Those who desire to participate in YCP can join any of their regional chapters in 20 major cities. These chapters host regional events, which include networking and a speaker. Members also gather for an annual conference where they are renewed in their faith and equipped to be Catholic leaders in the workforce. This past September, over 600 men and women gathered for the 2019 conference in Texas.

“We do this because we have hope,” Kanzelberger said. “We have hope because we know that even though people are lost, they are searching, and what they are searching for can be found in the Church, in the Body of Christ.”

GIVEN Institute

Archbishop Fulton Sheen is known for saying that “the history of civilization could actually be written in terms of the level of its women.” With that in mind, the GIVEN Institute is inspiring the next generation of Catholic female leaders by providing leadership training, formation and mentoring. Their purpose is to encourage women to “receive the gift that they are; realize the gifts they’ve been given; and respond with the gift that only they can give,” according to its website.

While the GIVEN Institute was only established in February 2018, the mission began two years prior with the first GIVEN Catholic Young Women’s Leadership Forum in 2016. Nearly 300 women and numerous religious sisters from across the country attended the inaugural event, which included talks by Catholic female leaders, training sessions, opportunities to recognize their gifts and strengths, and times for prayer and mentorship. This past June, 100 more women attended the 2019 GIVEN forum.

One of the most fruitful elements of GIVEN is that each woman

who participates in the forum receives a mentor who then walks with them in the coming year to develop their gifts, forming an action plan of how they can be witnesses of God in their communities. Many smaller apostolates have formed from the first forum, including websites such as FemCatholic and The Catholic Woman, which publishes stories and articles that empower young women from all walks of life, and the “No Greater Love Festival” that led to the conversion of 30 Native American men and women.

“At GIVEN, we believe the next generation of Catholic women leaders is critical for the life of the Church and for building a culture of life,” said Rachel Harkins Ullmann, executive director of the GIVEN Institute. “In an age where femininity and motherhood, both spiritual and physical, is attacked and distorted, the GIVEN Institute seeks to affirm the dignity of women and activate Catholic influencers who will not only be transformed in their own lives, but also reach the ‘nones’ and those in need of the living Christ.”

FOCUS



A missionary with FOCUS, right, and a local resident embrace at a work site in Peru. CNS photo/courtesy FOCUS

Studies show that many people who leave the Faith made the decision by the age of 13. However, many don't officially act on that decision until college when they are no longer under the supervision of their parents and, therefore, can refuse to attend Sunday Mass. The Fellowship of Catholic University Students is challenging this trend, sending missionaries to universities across the country to encounter these students, meeting them where they are and encouraging them to have a personal relationship with Christ. They lead Bible studies, host campus events and offer retreats, conferences and mission trips for students.

FOCUS started in 1998 when founder Curtis Martin brought two missionaries to Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. Now, FOCUS has over 730 missionaries serving in 172 locations in the U.S. and abroad. These missionaries are working with 7,100 students in one-on-one discipleship, helping them to navigate the difficulties of a college faith-life and guiding them to becoming disciples for their peers. Varsity Catholic missionaries also reach out to athletes on campuses, helping them to develop their faith life with the same dedication given to their sport. In addition, FOCUS Greek encounters those in fraternities and sororities, urging these leaders to help others in their communities toward Christ.

Among their initiatives, FOCUS offers two regular conferences for college students and young adults. SEEK invites attendees to ask big questions, such as "who we are, where we're going and what we seek along the journey." During these five days, students and young adults hear talks from a wide array of Catholic speakers and leaders. Prayer and the sacraments are also a large part of the conference, allowing time for an encounter with the Lord. Every other year, FOCUS hosts its Student Leadership Summit (SLS), which is geared toward students who already have a deep relationship with Christ but need the training and resources to share the Good News with their peers.

Shepherding Them Home

Many times the people who most need to be evangelized are family members, but parents and siblings don't always have the resources or knowledge to engage their family in conversations of faith. Shepherding Them Home, a ministry in the Diocese of Crookston, Minnesota, aims to be a resource to teach people how to accompany family members on their journey back to the Church and into a relationship with Christ.

"In the end, Shepherding Them Home is not so much a program as it is a practice," said Deacon Mark Krejci, director of the Crookston office of formation in discipleship. "Catholics commit to being a missionary disciple to a member of their own family, and it is in this practice of the life of a disciple, reaching out with love, patience and caring, that they seek to help their disaffiliated family member form a closer relationship with Jesus and his Church."

Deacon Krejci shared stories with Our Sunday Visitor about how Shepherding Them Home has assisted families. In one case, a mother realized she had not been praying for her son's conversion but rather focused on convincing him to go to Mass. After attending a prayershop – a workshop set within a time of prayer – and leaving with a "ministry plan," she changed her approach and began asking her son about his relationship with Jesus, learning to listen to his perspective and to continually bring her prayers to God. Another woman realized through Shepherding Them Home that her husband needed to be involved in the conversion of their daughter so together they could respond to her objections about the Faith.

While many people are discouraged by the rapid number of people leaving the Faith, Deacon Krejci believes that "this is an exciting time, because we are now commissioning every Catholic to be missionary disciples." He continued, "When this vision is alive in all of our parishes, people will be drawn to the Church so that they can find out why all of these

missionary disciples find joy in the Gospel message of Jesus Christ and sustenance in the body and blood.”

Corazón Puro

While our Hispanic brothers and sisters have a strong Catholic tradition, recent studies show that they, too, are leaving the faith. To combat this trend, Corazón Puro, a missionary-driven initiative, aims raise up Hispanic leaders of faith. Inspired by Pope St. John Paul II, the ministry teaches about human dignity and works to transform a culture of use to a culture of joyful and pure hearts.

In 2008, Odet Bisonó, a single mother from the Bronx, felt inspired to help form youth and teach them about chastity, sexuality and human dignity. She approached Father Agustino Tores, a priest with the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, and together they began Corazón Puro. Since then they have formed over 1,250 young people and adults – focusing on cultivating Hispanic Catholic leaders – and served over 10,000 individuals.

Other initiatives have stemmed from Corazón Puro, such as YO FOREAL, in which the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal share their knowledge of theology through social media, and Clic, a partnership with EWTN that produces 30-minute videos on “dynamic Catholic teaching on sex, relationships and love for a generation that seeks to break free from the lies of a ‘throwaway culture.’” These videos were created for youth and Spanish-speaking young adults and can be used in youth group settings. Corazón Puro also brings latinos and young people together through apostolates such as Latinos Por La Vida, Project Outskirt – which ministers to the poor and those on the margins of society – and mission trips around the country and abroad. Together these ministries and the leaders within Corazón Puro are transforming the culture one encounter at a time and empowering the Latino Catholic community.