

Home is Where the Heart Is

A Catholic Crisis

If the Catholic Church in the United States was to enter into a competition with other Christian churches in our country to see who could attract more quickly a group of non-Christian young people to join their congregation, who do you think would win? Unfortunately in our culture today, the answer is obvious. Our Protestant brothers and sisters beat us, with a vengeance. Not only are they attracting non-Christians but they are winning over baptized Catholics in droves. What is the secret to their success? Often we underplay their gains so as to cushion the blow to our egos or complacency as they consistently dare-I-say *evangelize* our Catholic brothers and sisters. But, this is not the response we are called to, instead we should stand up and take notice. We should notice that our separated brethren are doing something that we Catholics do rather dismally, and are carrying it out with wild success, *hospitality*.

A Call to Home

Hospitality is about creating a sense of comfort, welcome, acceptance-- its about making one feel "at home". For many teens today, home is a complicated thing. With divorce crippling families and breaking-up homes, so often that natural longing for a place to call home becomes an urgent and suppressed yearning in the hearts of our youth. While there can never be a replacement for the domestic Church, the arms of Mother Church are wide open waiting to embrace her children.

In the Rule of St. Benedict, one of the oldest and most formative documents in the Church, it says "Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for He is going to say, 'I came as a guest, and you received Me' (Matt. 25:35)... As soon as a guest is announced, therefore, let the Superior or the brethren meet him with all charitable service." As this quote shows, hospitality and putting guests at ease is our Catholic heritage. For centuries we have been safe-havens to the lost, a refuge to the world, and a home for the homeless. We can once again take ownership of this crucial work of the Church, if we learn how to create a home in our youth programs through friendship and beauty.

A Focus on Friendship

Putting it bluntly, today most people have no idea how to be friends with each other, and its only getting worse throughout our society and especially with our youth. We live in a virtual and over-individualized culture where many teens prefer texting to real conversation and equate facebook stalking to "keeping up a relationship". But, this does not need to define our Catholic teen culture. The early Church thrived because it provided a loving community rooted in the teaching of the apostles, the breaking of the bread (Eucharist), and the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:41-47). Today, we have the magisterium to guide us, the Eucharist to nourish us, and the Holy Spirit to enliven us, but often we do not have the community to support us, so we wither on the vine. Make your youth program a school in friendship. Hospitality naturally flows from a heart full of love and friends. Nobody will want to welcome others into a group where they feel just as disjointed and uncomfortable as the new kid who just walked in the door. But real friendship is rooted in openness with each other, and openness to others will naturally result when a community is trained in the art of friendship.

First, if you want to create a culture of friendship as a youth program, begin building friendship between the leaders. Each team member should know the others very well and much emphasis should be placed on fostering a sense of trust, respect, and openness between the leaders. As a team go out to dinner, joke around, share your homes and hearts, pray with each other. Just as any home starts with two parents, any youth program needs to start with leaders. This immediately creates an infectious experience of fun and trust which is the fuel for creating a real culture of friendship between youth. Second, place your focus on the kids coming every week. Often youth groups float in seas of interpersonal ambiguity, where you only know vaguely the teens in your parish. As a result, when new students come to join, they just blend into the faceless masses and never get the attention they deserve. Or worse, leaders neuter their efforts by trying to go deep spiritually without laying any of the necessary personal groundwork with any student. Working against this phenomena can start with small things, like knowing names. Make a powerpoint presentation of your current teens names, pictures, and personal facts, share it with the leadership team, memorize it. Knowing just even the most basic things can help

you tap into your teen's lives and hearts, ultimately earning you the right to be heard when you speak with them about Christ. Not only this, but it will make it easy to recognize when a newcomer joins and will help you know who can best relate to the new member of your community. Third, once you have invested in that group of students already coming, give them a mission. Show them how to welcome others, actively fight against cliques, and appoint a welcoming committee. Mission gives friendship a purpose and keeps it from going stale. This will keep the social interaction of your youth program fresh and will enable the Holy Spirit to flow between all members of the group.

The apostolate of friendship is ministry at its most basic level and when you create a culture of it, so much of your work as a youth leader is already done for you. For it is through friendship that we learn what it means to have a friendship with Christ, the relationship that is at the center of any healthy spiritual life.

An Opportunity for Beauty

In his address to the Bishops of Brazil Pope Francis explains the necessity of beauty in the heart of the Church, he says: "There is much we can learn from the approach of the fishermen. About a Church which makes room for God's mystery; a Church which harbours that mystery in such a way that it can entice people, attract them. Only the beauty of God can attract." What is our take-away here? Do things beautifully and educate the human heart through it. A huge part of hospitality is showing deference to your guests through effort to serve them with your very best. As difficult as it may seem in a world of youth culture where Doritos are considered an entire food group, leaven your youth program with beauty; for beauty raises hearts to contemplate the divine. Take your teens seriously. Goofy, crazy, outrageous moments are absolutely necessary in youth ministry, but don't leave it there. Show your teens enduring and mysterious beauty, bring them to a monastery for a retreat, go watch the stars together, share a delicious meal where they have to dress up, create stunning liturgy. Think this way: just like your mother brought out the china for her dinner guests, bring out the treasures of life and the Church for your youth program. This will not only make the teens recognize their dignity and worth, but it will draw them into the Sacred Heart of Christ who calls them to live beautiful lives.

A Final Question

Pope Francis recently asked this final question I pose to you today: "Are we still a Church capable of warming hearts? A Church capable of leading people back to Jerusalem? Of bringing them home?" Be bold enough to ask yourself this question and to respond to the Holy Father's call to hospitality in your youth program. Once you do, you will see that an *effective* and *evangelizing* youth ministry program does some amazing things for Christ through hospitality: it opens hearts to relationships rooted in true friendship, it fosters a beautiful and inspiring vision of life, it reaffirms the dignity of every person who walks through the door, and it attracts and roots souls to the truth of Christ and his Bride. So remember to make your youth program into a hospitable home through authentic friendship and inspiring beauty, because home is where the heart is.

Anne Morath worked as a youth and college minister while living and operating a house for Catholic college students in Michigan. Just recently, she was accepted to the University of St. Thomas for their Master's program in Catholic Studies. She currently resides near Ann Arbor, Michigan and enjoys hospitality, holding social events, baking and cooking, reading, and enjoying life with her family and friends.

