



Importance of Truth in Youth Ministry

By Brittany Storgaard

When Pontius Pilate famously asks “What is truth?” in John 18:38, he inadvertently makes himself the spokesman for the children of post-modernity relativism, the children of the 21st century. It is nothing new to say that, in today’s culture, total distrust of absolute truth has led our young people to two extreme conclusions, that there is either no truth or all truth, but certainly not one truth. Here we find one of the greatest challenges of youth ministry: to not only dispel this great lie, but to introduce teens to truth itself, which is, of course, not a fact or an ideology, but a person, the very person whom Pilate stood before when he asked his infamous question.

With this challenge before us, one of the most dangerous assumptions to make is that the mind and heart are two isolated realities. I remember once in college when I was told that the classroom is for knowledge of Christ and the youth center is for encounter with Christ. They are two very different spaces used for two very different purposes. Essentially, school is not church and church is not school. Now, having lived both roles as both a youth minister and high school theology teacher, I would have to disagree. Yes, there are definite differences between the spaces and methods used in them, but if Christ really is truth itself, then the goal of both the classroom and the youth center is knowledge, because knowledge is truth and truth is Christ, and if we want our young people to encounter him, we must teach him. We must educate in both spaces, appealing to the mind as much as we ever try to appeal to the heart.

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What do I mean by all of this? For me, youth ministry is as much a classroom as my own classroom is. I am not talking in abstract here. I am talking true education, presenting

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youth each day with new information about Christ and the Church that targets their brains and feeds their intellects. I’m talking about lessons on the teachings of the Fathers, the history of the liturgy, papal

encyclicals, the Greek and Hebrew words that give us our modern translations of the Bible, the lives of the saints, the dense vocabulary of the *Catechism*. Everything. Deep theology. How do we do this?

First and foremost, we must educate ourselves. There was a time between when I graduated and a year into my first job that I did not pick up single book on theology. My degree was complete; why study more? When it came time for me to speak with a teen about a faith crisis she was having, I realized quickly that the information I thought I had previously exhausted had only been the beginning of what I needed to be a true advocate for Christ amidst the ever growing and changing questions our young people face in the today's rapidly evolving culture. I went back to the books. I enrolled in new classes. I read online articles. I bought CDs to play in my car. Through of this, I realized something, that as my mind woke back up to matters of faith, my heart woke back up as well. I hadn't even realized that as I put my studies away, the fire I had grown in my heart for Christ had been put away as well. The more I studied to be a minister for this teen, the more I became a minister to myself again. It didn't matter what the subject material was, just educating myself on my faith again was as much a spiritual encounter as any retreat. There is no lacking truth in Christ or the teachings of his church. We can truly never run out of new things to learn and new things to teach. We can never know enough about Christ just as we can never know Christ enough.

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Second, as we educate ourselves, we must educate our youth. Teens crave information. They crave facts and figures and data. The age of internet technology has literally wired them for this desire and they will satisfy it through any avenue they can, meaning that if they don't get it from us, they will get it from somewhere else. If we are to attempt to form hearts driven to Christ, we must not forget their minds. We must not forget to instruct. We must not forget that to encounter Christ means to know Christ, to learn him and study him as though preparing for a final exam, perhaps the final exam. My favorite moments in ministry are when some truth of the faith has been explained to a teen and you can actually see the light go on in their eyes. They finally get it. It's finally tangible to them. Their brain comprehends the argument. It's not that their heart didn't already believe, but that they desired to understand it as much as they desired to profess it. It's as powerful of a moment for them as any praise and worship session. Knowledge itself is enough when it is rooted in truth, in Christ. This information is concrete. It is structured. Each lesson presents a new fact, a new piece of trivia, a new statistic, something that teens can take with them and explain to others easily and succinctly. Youth will take pride in

their knowledge as it grows, they will repeat it, and perhaps without realizing it, they will be at the same time be taking pride in and repeating Christ.

Finally, we must not be afraid. This idea of teaching in youth ministry may not be new at all. Of course we teach in youth ministry, just as we pray and sing and share in small circles. This is old news...and that's the problem. We teach the same things over and over again. We know the curriculum for what an 8th grader needs to master in order to be confirmed. We have done the same "lesson" for the seniors going off to college for the last five years. It's no wonder that the burnout rate for youth ministers is so tragically high. The Church and the knowledge she holds is so great and yet we only teach what we're most familiar with, most comfortable with.

I made this mistake teaching catechism to 9th graders. I repeated to them the very things that had been taught to me years before in youth group, the things I had heard my youth ministers say over and over again, because it was easy and familiar and I was confident in it. The result? I loved what I was teaching, of course, but I was bored, and so my teens were bored too. I needed something new, something fresh, something I could be excited about, but I was afraid to go outside my comfort zone. What if I brought in something new and didn't know how to express it because I wasn't as practiced in it? What if this new thing wasn't as safe, what if it upset someone because it wasn't as commonly taught or known? What if I ran out of new things? Impossible. If we are teaching truth, then none of these fears has any weight because truth, because Christ, never fails. If we are faithfully seeking Christ, we will find him in the truths we find in his Church, whatever they may be, and the more we expand our knowledge, the more we venture into the deep and take our teens with us, the clearer the face of Christ will become for us. We only know so little of him compared to what can be known. The more we know, the more our teens will know. The more our teens know, the more the world will know. The more the world knows, the more will Pilate's question be able to be answered by all. "What is truth?" "I AM."



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