

LITURGICAL CATECHESIS

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To BUILD YOUR LIFE ON CHRIST: Liturgy and the Millennial Generation

“Youth Mass as Intergenerational Gift Exchange”

Catechesis and Communication

Here are a few words for the sometimes-underappreciated people in the pews, the assembly. Congratulations! Your favorite timeslot for liturgy has just been designated as the new parish youth Mass! What’s that? You’re just finding this out as the presider and ministers are walking down the aisle for the entrance procession? Yes, the gathering song is indeed louder and livelier. That young lector is reading with great enthusiasm. And, yes, all those informally-dressed teenagers really are extraordinary ministers of holy Communion.

Hopefully, the parish youth ministers and liturgy committee have taken great care to publicize and inform the parishioners about any impending changeover to a more youth-oriented liturgy. Having said that, there will always be people who did not hear the news, or who have not attended that particular Mass for a long time. What will they find at this new youth Mass?

In an ideal world, the people in the pews will find a vibrant liturgy where young people are involved—fully, consciously, and actively—in the various ministries of music, lector, extraordinary ministers of holy Communion, and hospitality. They will find a liturgy where the presider understands how to communicate with adolescents, leading them to reverent and deep prayer. They will find a homilist who engages young people in a reflection on the Word that truly touches their hearts and moves them to ongoing conversion. The music will be upbeat yet prayerful. And the people in the pews will find that all this wonderful liturgical orientation to youth does not alienate the older generation but engages them as well.

This is obviously a best-case scenario. Youth liturgies seem to have high expectations built in. Most likely, the typical parish youth Mass falls somewhere between the two extremes of “excellent” and “needs improvement.” This raises the question “Why even have a youth Mass at all?”

Our Multicultural Church

Ours is a multicultural Church in which the word “catholic” truly comes alive. We are blessed to celebrate an abundance of cultures and traditions at eucharistic liturgy. Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony presides over one of the most culturally diverse archdioceses in the United States. In his pastoral letter, *Gather Faithfully Together: A Guide for Sunday Mass (GFT)* (OCP 11698TL), the Cardinal makes this observation:

We are one. Our Catholic faith will not allow the distinction “us” versus “them.” On Sunday we gather in one Lord, one faith, one Baptism. Yet, we are many. When we gather, it is also to witness to the universality of our faith, evident in the many parts that make up the one Body. We celebrate the diverse experiences, cultures, and charisms that assemble around the one table. (9:28)

The United States Catholic Bishops (USCCB), in their landmark youth ministry document, *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry (RV)* (nccbuscc.org/laity/youth/rtvintro.shtml), carries this multicultural dimension further:

All liturgy takes place within a cultural milieu and context. Respect for cultures and inclusion of native art, music, and expressions are visible components of vibrant worship. Adolescents reflect a distinct age group and “culture” within our society. Their language expressions, musical styles, and ways of life are often quite different from those of

older generations. Those who prepare the liturgy need to find appropriate ways to incorporate the world of young people into worship. (44:3b)

Teenagers are a distinct culture. Parents have always suspected this (“Turn down that music!”), teens know this implicitly (“My parents don’t understand me!”), and Madison Avenue has been marketing to them since the birth of rock and roll. Admittedly, teen culture is transitory. As teens grow into adulthood, another young generation comes along with its own unique expressions and styles. Teen culture certainly merits a place at the Lord’s table, to celebrate along with all other cultures.

More than just “the future of the Church,” teenagers are a sign of vibrant life in today’s Church. Their gifts of enthusiasm, openness to new ideas, and sense of fun and their emerging spirituality can inspire the older generations and help a parish come alive. At the same time, adult parishioners have their own gifts to share and traditions to hand on to young people. The liturgy can be an ideal medium for this exchange of gifts.

While a youth Mass can be an exciting focus for teen energy in the parish, care must be taken to strike a balance that doesn’t compromise the universality of the liturgy. If a youth liturgy is overly teen-oriented, it runs the risk of alienating older parishioners. At the same time, there must be enough of a youth “character” in a youth Mass to attract teens who might

not otherwise consider participating in their parish.

Our Intergenerational Church

Ministry with adolescents recognizes the importance of the intergenerational faith community in sharing faith and promoting healthy growth in adolescents. Meaningful involvement in parish life and the development of intergenerational relationships provide young people with rich resources to learn the story of the Catholic faith experientially and to develop a sense of belonging to the Church. (RV 22:1a)

In this spirit of intergenerational sharing, adults can support their parish youth Mass by attending that liturgy, whether or not they have teens in their family. Through their own singing, praying, and active participation, adults model to young people the importance of liturgy in their lives. If adults seem bored at Eucharist and don’t sing or pay attention to the homily, youth will pick up on that and do the same.

Ministry with adolescents can incorporate young people into the intergenerational opportunities already available in the parish community, identify and develop leadership opportunities in the parish for young people, and create intergenerational support networks and mentoring relationships. (RV 22:1b)

Adults can mentor young musicians, lectors and extraordinary ministers of holy Communion, giving teens the benefit of their experience. Words of encouragement are always greatly

appreciated by young people after liturgy, and this will help build their confidence in serving the community. Another way for adults to participate is to volunteer. Youth ministers always need help in areas like volunteer appreciation dinners, service trips (like Christmas caroling, singing at diocesan events), mentoring, and chaperoning.

At the same time, young people need to keep in mind that the liturgy is for all people and serves all. Yes, use those elements that celebrate youth: enthusiasm, music with a beat, movement and gestures, and youth liturgical ministers. But do not push away the older generation. Share your gifts, and let yourselves in turn be gifted by those who have received your gifts.

Before we are anything else—any sex, ethnicity, nationality or citizenship—we need to be the body of Christ, sisters and brothers by our Baptism. Everyone needs to know by heart some of the music, vocabulary, movement, and ways of thinking and feeling that are not of our own background. The larger society we are part of needs this witness. (GFT 10:29)

May the parish youth Mass be a source of unity, joy, and growth for every generation!

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