

# Types of Youth Retreats

## Evangelization through Youth Retreats

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Once I received a telephone call from a rather disgruntled pastor. During the course of our conversation, he posed a question, born of more than a little frustration and exasperation, “What do you do with young people today?” I sensed from the tone of the question that he had some definite things in mind that he wanted to do “to” them, but that his better judgment and pastoral concern prohibited such a course of action.

As I have traveled around various parts of the country, during the last ten years, I have heard that question, and ones like it, raised again and again. It has been raised most often by people who were working with youth in some kind of church context and who wanted to do something for them. The motivation for the question is at least twofold. The first is an awareness that the church, or some people from the church, have a responsibility to do something for young people. Oftentimes that something is not very clear.

The most pressing occasion for that “something” is to get young people to attend youth groups or youth group activities, or to attend religious education classes or events of one kind or another, especially confirmation-preparation. At other times, the “something” is to get young people more involved in parish life by working on a service project or being on the parish council.

The second motivating factor is the awareness or knowledge that a lot of things do not seem to be working all that well in the lives of many young people. Growing up through adolescence in the best of times was not that easy to do. And today, for many reasons, that process seems to have become more difficult and problematic for many young people. Identity problems, loneliness, rejection, relationships at home, decision making, relating to the opposite sex, school, facing the future, handling the ups and downs of emotions, drugs, and alcohol present some real difficulties for young people. The results are evident in the lives of young people through the use of drugs and alcohol, boredom, depression, and general, overall anxiety and frustration. It is often these things that motivate people from the churches to want to do something for youth.

The crux of the matter is “something” should be done. Regarding this “something,” those active in youth ministry have available to them a variety of options, offered as the keys to opening doors to the “something.” For some the key is self-image, helping young people to feel better about themselves. For others, it is communication skills, learning how to identify their needs, wants, and desires so that they can more effectively communicate them to others. For others, it is relationship building, meeting young people where they’re at, and developing warm, positive relationships with them. For others, the key is liberating young people from oppressive structures that adults have placed them in—school, advertising, certain civil laws. For others, it is education that has based on the latest psychological and developmental theories. For still others, it is values clarification, helping young people to recognize and choose their own values and lifestyles.

The problem, then, is not in finding keys to open up the world of “something,” but in determining which, if any, is the real key.

I was once in a discussion with the staff of the St. Paul Catholic Youth Center (St. Paul, Minnesota) on the topic of what “something” was to be done with young people, and what the key to that “something” was. The occasion for the discussion was the retreat program for young people at the Center. More particularly, the discussion was focused on how the retreat program could more effectively work with young people. In the year prior to this meeting, we had tried a number of the keys, mentioned previously, with varying degrees of success. The retreat program was growing. Some of the keys we had used were producing some change and growth. Yet, there was a vague sense of something important missing.

It was that vague sense, rumbling around in the corners of the discussion, that prompted us to continue the discussion. We were not quite sure where it would lead, or how we could grab hold of that elusive “something” important. One member of the discussion, during a momentary lull, recalled a comment that he had recently heard. “For too long people in the church have been giving good advice rather than good news.” At the time, it seemed a provocative one-liner. But, we were not quite sure how to understand it or how to apply it to the matter at hand. We soon began to find more clarity, in both understanding and applying it.

During the next few months, that same year, a number of people in the Center’s retreat program got involved in the charismatic renewal. For one, it was through a conference on healing, in a neighboring state. For another, it was a chance visit at a local prayer meeting. For another, it was simply to observe this questionable new “thing.” For each of us, it was, I believe, a search for that elusive “something” that prompted our inquiries into the charismatic renewal. What we found in the renewal was much more than we expected. Yet, it began to clarify for us the nature of the “something” that we were looking for – both for the retreat program and our work with young people, generally, and for ourselves.

What we found, initially, were people who were enlivened with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Their praise and worship of God was joyful and enthusiastic. Their stories about how God was active in their lives made it sound as if God were really doing something. Their appreciation and use of Scripture to guide, direct, and shape their lives, their trust in the care and love of God, their amazement at the mercy and greatness of the Lord, make a great impression upon us.

Those of us on the staff at the Center attended these prayer meetings for a short time. Then, we began meeting on our own to pray and sing, to worship God, and to share Scripture with one another. Soon, others who were involved, on a volunteer basis, with the Center’s ministries began to join us.

Looking back now, the “something” more we had been looking for was the person and work of Jesus Christ. We had begun to see what God had done in him and how the way to life was through him. We also had begun to see that the key to “something” more was conversion.

We quite quickly began to see that this “something,” and the key to it, was the absolutely irreplaceable foundation upon which our lives and the lives of young people we worked with had to be built. We were, in a word, being evangelized. Since that time we have learned, again and again, in some situations that were painful and others that were joyful, that the real power

to live the Christian life comes from that one foundation, the foundation of what God has done for us in Jesus.

There is a current saying that has wisdom and experience behind it. It says, "Anyone who has a conversion experience should be locked up for at least six months." Many of us have stories about being overcome by those who have found the truth. In our zeal to communicate the importance of what we have found, it is more than possible to overwhelm someone else with our discovery. And so it was with us. We redesigned the focus for the whole retreat program, then unleashed it on our volunteer staff, those who work with the young people on retreats.

We tried to do too much, with too many, too quickly. To move from the focus of feeling better about yourself, to communication skills and values clarification, to conversion and commitment, to Jesus Christ, in one weekend, is a formidable undertaking! Relationships that had been built on one foundation were now being moved and deepened to another. Understandings of what the goals of retreats should be were being changed in substantial and significant ways. There were discussions, testimonies, new songs, tears, hurt feelings, and laughter, all at the same time. All in all, it was an important beginning. The foundation was being laid.

The focus, from that time on, was the person and work of Jesus. Scripture and the life of the church became the reference points for the design and the content of the retreats. Many of the topics that had previously been part of the retreat program remained, but the focus was different. For example, presentations on self-image focused on what God has done for us, and how the basis for our value is found in our relationship with the Lord. Peer pressure became focused on how we were to live our lives, and how we were to determine the standards to live by.

The overall thrust was to help young people see more clearly their great need to respond to what God has done for them in Jesus. As a result, overcoming obstacles to receiving what God has done for us became a major element in the retreat design.

Much of the difficulty young people have in receiving the Lord has to do with basic areas of disorder in their lives. Whether that disorder is in how they perceive themselves, their family, their school, or their future, they need to respond more to the Lord's initiative, drawing them to his life, than respond to the area of confusion or disorder in their lives.

Early on, in the redesigned retreat program, we discovered some very significant things. These are, in one sense, most obvious, given the teachings of the Scriptures and the church, but they were not obvious to us, nor were they obvious to many of those searching for that elusive "something."

One discovery was the power of God's Word in Scripture. We found that we had tended to replace the Word of God, as it is revealed in Scripture, with the words of contemporary writing, especially psychology and human development. We tended, for example, to develop a process on the findings of a current theory, throwing in a Scripture verse here and there (if we could find one that had some similarity with the point a secular theorist was making). The real authority behind our approach had been current thinking. Replacing that authority with the authority of the Word of God was a significant change. It brought much more effectiveness to our work with young people on retreats.

Catholic young people tend to be uninformed as to what the Scriptures teach about who God is, what our real condition is without knowledge of God, what God has done in Jesus, the purpose that he has for our lives, and how we can give our lives to him. These basic themes of redemption provide the basis and the power for the Christian life. There is nothing which can replace these saving acts of God. Scripture, as it comes to us, through the life of the church, authentically presents and interprets these mighty words of God on our behalf.

Scripture, then, passed on to us through the life of the church, is the standard by which we are to understand and live out our lives. This is true for young people, as well as for those not so young. Hearing and responding to basic gospel realities initiates the process of evangelization. It is these basic gospel realities which provide the foundation for or entry way into Christian life. It is no accident that the central elements in Christian life, such as liturgy, ecclesiology, and moral teaching, are accessible only through the basic gospel message. This may seem a bit abstract, especially with regard to the evangelization of youth, but it does have applicability. Its applicability is something that we learned as we began to redesign our retreat program, then as we implemented our redesigned models.

Many of the requests that we receive from parishes, schools, and special groups are for retreats, with themes such as liturgy, confirmation, Eucharist, reconciliation, or a particular area of personal or social morality, dating, sexuality, drugs and alcohol, family relationships, world hunger, or a specific personal concern such as self-image, peer pressure, or friendships. These are certainly significant issues, ones worthy of considerable discussion and reflection. A large number of resources make discussion and reflection possible.

The context for these issues and the perspective one would take, as well as the principles one would use, are rooted in basic realities of the gospel. For example, if a person does not understand the meaning of redemption, of our need for a Savior to overcome the impossible situation we are in, and of how God has given us in Christ the way to a new life, in which we can be what we were truly intended to be, then the church's sacramental life will be essentially unintelligible and opaque. If a person does not understand the unique and irreplaceable role of the person of Jesus in our redemption, and how that is mediated through Scripture, and the teaching and life of the church, then, following the teachings of Jesus will be subject to other factors, such as personal preferences, cultural pressures, and the opinions of the latest experts.

The underlying focus of our retreats reflects the significance of the basic gospel, covering topics such as, "Who did Jesus say he was?"; "What did he say about our condition?"; "What did he say sin was?"; "Freedom?"; "Truth?"; "Life?"; "Who is the Holy Spirit?"; "What do Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection mean?" The wonderful thing about topics such as these is that they form the backdrop for the whole Christian life, and provide the power to live it. This reflects a fundamental principle of catechetics: *didache* (catechesis) is rooted in the *kerygma* (basic gospel message). Some time ago, Archbishop Flores remarked that many Catholics have been catechized without ever being evangelized. We have certainly found that to be accurate in our work, with young people, on retreats. I believe the real power of Christian life lies in the basic truths of Christianity. As we move more and more deeply into those truths, we will find more clarity, also more power to live their meaning in our lives.

I find it most interesting that when the gospel is presented, it often has an effect on the way young people experience the sacraments, particularly Eucharist and reconciliation. At the end of our weekend retreats, we ask young people to share one or two things that have had the

greatest impact on them, things that made the most difference for them. The part of the weekend mentioned most often is the sacrament of reconciliation. For many, it is a time for encountering the person of Jesus, finding in that encounter forgiveness, grace, healing, and life.

Sacrament finds its power and its source in the gospel. The gospel teaches who Jesus is and our proper response to him. Young people, older ones as well, are not noted for their frequent reception of the sacrament of reconciliation. The experience of young people on weekend retreats gives clear indication of this sacrament's effectiveness when it is situated within the context of the basic gospel. We have found the same to be true for Eucharist.

This is not intended to imply that the situation in which the sacraments are celebrated creates the conditions for the grace of the sacrament. It is said simply to point out a major factor to fruitful reception of the sacrament. I do not mean to imply that all young people respond in the same way. The simple fact is that they do not. The major point that I want to make, however, is that the central truths of Christian life are found in Scripture. These truths are given to us so that we might know and have the power to live out the truth.

I want to make two more comments about the focus of our retreat program. The first has to do with some tendencies present in youth ministries today. Many today, who are active in youth ministry, either in a full-time or volunteer capacity, are searching for the "something" that will enable them to be more effective in their work with youth. Oftentimes, most often in desperation, the tendency is to grab hold of the latest idea or approach to helping young people deepen their understanding of and commitment to the person of Christ. The difficulty is when someone takes the latest approach, seeing in it the whole thing.

More to the point, the danger is replacement of Scripture and the basic truths of the gospel with the latest approach. I have seen people like ourselves who have replaced the gospel with transactional analysis, or assertiveness training, or becoming your own person, or nondirective approaches to working with young people, or values clarification. The list can go on. None of these approaches can replace the gospel. They can be helpful once they have been measured against the gospel.

The second comment is related to the first. In our desire to work effectively with youth, we run into frustration because, oftentimes, the young people are not, or do not seem to be, responding in a good way. This frustration can lead to the search for the "latest thing," which accounts for the tricks-and-gimmicks market in youth ministry. Young people can be difficult to work with. They can be unresponsive, or worse yet, responsive in the wrong ways. I do not want to convey, in my reflections on our retreat work, the impression that we have found a model that is guaranteed to reach, effectively, every young person and to help deepen relationships with Christ. We share in the frustrations and difficulties that go along with youth evangelism. We do believe that power to change young people comes through the person and work of Christ. Where Christ is preached and his Word taught, his life is released and the invitation is sent forth.

The primary thrust of our work continues to be evangelistic. The talks, music, drama, small groups, relationship-building, and liturgies are directed toward that one, basic end. There is a variety of ways that one basic end is approached, but the underlying direction is the same. A primary task is the development of ways to follow-up on the work that the retreat teams do. In our local area, we have weekly prayer meetings, monthly open-house liturgies, and a week-long

leadership training session at our camp to offer some follow-up. We are seriously considering other means of follow-up. We hope to have begun use of more print and video follow-up resources, and to provide more training for leadership within the local area.

Our own movement in this area, and our growth in it, was not undertaken at our initiative. It was something that we happened into. We recognized the need, to be more deliberate and intentional in our future planning. We also do not want to plan ourselves out of God’s leading and initiative. It is a delicate balance. And it is a balance we are praying to keep.

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