



Introduction



Imagine this scene: a mid-sized suburban parish calls a meeting for all high school freshmen and their parents. It is the first meeting of the year, and it serves as an introduction to senior high youth ministry and consequently, confirmation preparation.

The youth minister who is directing the meeting begins with an ice breaker and opening prayer. Then, before she says anything of substance, a dialogue is opened.

Youth Minister So, freshmen, why are you here? *(The question is followed by silence)* Come on people, why are you here? You can be honest. Anyone? *(The young people look at their friends with that familiar adolescent smirk and then look at their parents to try to sense if it is alright to speak freely. Still, no one volunteers.)* You, why are you here?

Young Boy *(Answers with a question)* To learn about God and stuff?

Youth Minister Alright, how about you?

Shy Young Girl *(Timidly)* I don't know, same as what he said I guess.

Youth Minister To learn about God and stuff! Anyone else? What about you?

Brave Young Boy Because my mom made me come. *(Laughter)*

Youth Minister Honesty! I like it! Couple more..., you there. *(Hands are going up now)*

Confident Boy To get confirmed.

Youth Minister Makes sense. One more. How about you?

Logical Girl Because you told us to come.

Youth Minister I did? When?

Logical Girl You sent us a letter and told us to come.

Youth Minister Oh, the letter. Well, if you go home and read that letter again, you just might see that it was more of an invitation than anything else, but hey, if that's what you got out of the letter, far be it from me to criticize. Now, how about the parents here? Why are you here? And you can't say "To learn about God and stuff," because that's already been taken.

Parent One To find out what my daughter has to do in order to be confirmed.

Youth Minister Okay. I'm sure we'll cover that.

Parent Two I want my son to have what I had.

Youth Minister If you don't mind me asking, what did you have that you want your son to have?

Parent Two Well, when I was his age, I went to Mass every week with my family and I learned about the saints and how to say the different prayers and about the Ten Commandments and things like that. I want him to learn about our religion and be proud of it.

Youth Minister Thank you. Anyone else?

Parent Three I guess then that I want my daughter to have what I didn't have. Because I went to Mass every week with my parents too, but I didn't really learn anything. I want my daughter to learn something.

Youth Minister Alright. Someone has a hand up in the back.

Parent Four Yeah, I wasn't going to raise my hand but you know, I hated going to church when I was a teenager. It was boring and I really didn't care about what they were trying to teach me. And I just really want my daughter to know that it's okay to have fun at church. Don't get me wrong. I want her to learn about "God and stuff" too, but in a fun and interesting way.

Youth Minister Well then, hopefully what I introduce to you tonight will address all of these wants.

Anyone who works in parish youth ministry where the sacrament of confirmation is celebrated at a junior high school or senior high school level will be very familiar with this type of dialogue. Every answer to the question, "Why are you here?" by both the youth and their parents is pretty much what we in Church leadership should expect. Their answers reflect an American Church in transition and a Church that is still forming an identity since Vatican II.

"WHY ARE YOU HERE?"

"To learn about God and stuff?" The young boy answers with a question. He thinks that the youth minister is looking for a specific answer. He is programmed by an academic society. He spends most of his time in a classroom and therefore assumes that the Church is a classroom as well. Who can blame him? The Church has been a classroom in many ways for many decades. In the pages to come, this book will put forth an attitude toward youth ministry that breaks through the walls of the classroom and moves into all facets of life. "Attitude" is the key word because much of what is written here is not really new strategy. It's a combination of strategies that frees us from the shackles of a "youth program" and reclaims

an initiatory attitude toward senior high youth ministry.

“Because my mom made me come.” Let’s face it, in an ideal world, freshmen in high school would willingly come to church without pressure from their parents. But realistically, even the best parents in the world will have teenagers who need to be prodded to do things simply because of the nature of adolescence. I always tell parents of freshmen that if they have to make their kids get involved in youth ministry at first, that just may be a necessary evil. But if they are still making their teen participate after a year or so, then we have to talk. A good youth ministry will help foster the ongoing conversion process that began in childhood and continues on through adolescence and adulthood. A good youth ministry will eventually see young people begin to voluntarily participate when their conversion process shifts from a “faith given” to a “faith owned.” The suggestions offered in this book will help parishes establish this “good youth ministry” for which we are all striving.

“To get confirmed.” In my opinion, one of the worst things that we in Church leadership have done is to present our sacraments (especially the sacraments of initiation) as things we obtain or “get.” Too often in our Church, confirmation is perceived as something you get if you jump through the right hoops and complete all the requirements. Many of us in parish leadership complain that too many young people see confirmation as an end or a graduation from the parish. Even as we insist that confirmation is a beginning, faith formation and parish participation can easily come to an end with confirmation. With this in mind, we the Church can ask ourselves: “Why do so many Catholics view confirmation as an end?” In her book *Fashion Me a People*, Maria Harris deals with this topic in a more broad sense by taking a look at our language:

My own educational work is a search to find new ways of speaking about this, since the language we use to describe our work has enormous power, either to support or to undermine what we are attempting to do. (Harris, pp. 39-40)

According to Harris, who takes an in-depth look at the language we use in religious education, by understanding education as much more than “schooling,” we can begin to breakdown the misconception that education is only for the young. In a similar fashion, this book will examine how we speak and think about youth ministry (and consequently the sacrament of confirmation) with an eye toward how our language affects (positively and negatively) what we are trying to accomplish (i.e. receive confirmation vs. celebrate confirmation).

“Because you told us to come.” Even though a 2002 *Special Report on Young Adult Catholics* by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA, p. 5) suggests that in general younger generations of American Catholics are moving away from viewing the Church as an authority, there are still elements of a “tell me what to do and what not to do” attitude, even among our young people. Young people today are presented with far more options than even the youth from ten years ago. It has reached a point in our society that now our young people cannot deal with all of the choices. Perhaps as a defense mechanism, some adolescents will actually seek out less freedom (quite different from the youth of previous generations). There is no doubt that many youth are not getting parameters at home (even from the most conservative households) and therefore may want someone in authority to tell them what to do. “I am here because you, a person of authority, told me I had to come, and I’m just following orders.” This is a unique problem that we are facing. How do we not revert back to a pre-Vatican II attitude of letting Church authority think for us when our

society offers far too many choices for one person to handle? Answer: read on!

“To find out what my daughter has to do in order to be confirmed.” Does this sound familiar? It should, because it goes back even to the time of Jesus. Recall Matthew 19:16–30, Mark 10:17–31, and Luke 18:18–30: “Master, what do I have to do in order to have eternal life?” Jesus responds, “Obey the commandments.” Response: “I have done this; what else do I have to do?” Jesus drops a bomb: “If you want to be perfect, sell all your belongings and follow me.” The man goes away very sad because he cannot bring himself to do what Jesus suggests. Imagine if the youth minister addressed the parent’s concern by responding: “In order to be confirmed, your teenage daughter must part with all selfishness. She must choose a lifestyle that is one of loving service to others. Her attitude must be the same as Jesus’, the humble servant. Then and only then will she be able to confirm her baptism.” Of course, answering the concern in that fashion would not be very pastoral and would probably come off as harsh; however, there are some questions here to consider.

Is it right for a parish to set minimum requirements that must be completed in order for one to be confirmed and/or should a certain level of conversion be reached as the criteria? Do parishes who prepare for confirmation at a high school level put too much emphasis on “the confirmation program” and not enough on total youth ministry? How much difference (if any) should there be between a senior high youth ministry in a diocese where the young people are confirmed before they reach high school and a diocese that confirms during the high school years? Do we, like Jesus, allow some people to walk away very sad when we suggest that there is more to Christian initiation than the “fulfillment of minimum requirements”? The teenage daughter of the parent may not have the “total conversion” that Jesus asks of the rich man, but she *can* be part of an ongoing conversion process fostered by a youth ministry within her

parish that will accept her no matter what. Keep in mind that we do not know what eventually happens to the rich man in the gospels. Perhaps years later he completely gives himself over to Jesus. This book will help you implement the kind of youth ministry that meets people where they are and allows them to journey at their own pace.

“I want my son to have what I had.” This parent is going to have the hardest time accepting an “experience leads to learning” approach to youth ministry. As stated in *The Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis: Maturing in Faith*, “Adolescent catechesis is clearly in a state of transition, reflecting both the cultural and ecclesial shifts of the past two decades” (#3). The way this parent received religious instruction is notably different than the way her child will be formed. Today the Church is stressing experience just as much as indoctrination in respect to catechesis within youth ministry: “Experiential learning...gives rise to concerns and questions, hopes and anxieties, reflections and judgments, which increase one’s desire to penetrate more deeply into life’s meaning” (*Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States*, 176d). The directory calls for ongoing faith experiences, which leads to ongoing faith formation. We the Church have recognized that it is the experience of God as lived out through the community that allows us to appreciate and internalize the facts of the faith and our prayer traditions. Experiential learning is at the heart of this book’s suggested strategy for youth ministry catechesis.

“I want my daughter to have what I didn’t have.” This parent experienced the opposite end of the pendulum when the Church was stressing that “Jesus loves you,” but was not making any real connection between the love of Jesus and our Catholic tradition. This parent feels “ripped off” because no one ever connected him to the reality that the basics of our faith can come alive! He wants more for his daughter. Young people today learn

best through experience. This is undeniable. But experience must always lead to learning; otherwise, we might as well not have had the experience in the first place.

For example, I have seen parishes coordinate some great weekend retreat experiences for their youth. The Spirit of Jesus is alive and the love is so thick that it permeates the room. But when the experience is over and there is no ongoing follow-up (connected to our faith and tradition), the retreat becomes a one-shot deal, a one-time conversion experience, and in the long run, it doesn't make much of a difference in one's faith formation. The challenge explored in this book is not only to foster these Jesus experiences, but to unpack them so as to recognize how Scripture and tradition are and always have been intertwined with the "God experience."

"I want my daughter to know that it's okay to have fun at Church." In youth ministry, there is a balancing act that occurs between having fun and instilling a sense of sacredness. For example, I learned a valuable lesson early on as a young youth minister at a small group liturgy preparation meeting when I allowed some of the young people

to wear hats, chew gum, lean on the altar, etc. in the church building. I was overly concerned that they were too uptight in the church. It took a colleague to point out that "comfortable" does not always mean "casual." Then, in another situation later on in my career, I unconsciously was so obsessed with sacredness while conducting a church tour that everything seemed to be "really serious" according to the youth who participated. I remember thinking to myself, "It's no wonder many youth have a difficult time imagining a laughing Jesus!" Moral of these stories: If we who coordinate youth ministry provide structure, instill a sense of the sacred, empower leadership, and grant free time, we will find that youth will be enriched in everything that we do. Everything is sacred, and a respect for people, places, and things will come naturally to our young people as long as our relationship with them is natural and as long as the education and discipline that we pass on is authentic and sincere.

If there is one thing I have learned, it is that youth ministry is a lot like the mystery of God: there is always more to experience and learn. This book will help you implement a parish youth ministry that works, but it leaves much room for you to make it work even better. So, let's get going.