



PLANS OF HOPE

HOUMA-THIBODAUX PARISH PLANNING

DIOCESAN PLANNING PRIORITY NO. 2: YOUTH FORMATION

CHAPTER 12 SECTION 5



WHAT?

What do we see happening across the United States?

The challenges we face in the in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux are not isolated to south Louisiana. The challenges facing the Church locally are the same trends that we see across the country. If we are to remain committed to pioneering a new vision of youth formation in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, we would do well to understand what we see happening across the country.

The remaining information in this section is a collection of research from leading experts in the area of information. In order to best serve you we thought it would be a good idea to let you here from the leaders of youth formation.

Let us begin with the USCCB Convocation from 2017: *The Convocation of Catholic Leaders: The Joy of the Gospel in America*. There, on Sunday, July 2, 2017 the US Bishops choose Amy McEntee, Brandon Vogt, Ketherine Angula, and Jonathan Lewis to address the nation. Here is a summary of their presentation entitled *The Rise of the Nones and Understanding Inactive and Disconnected Catholics*.

- While parents ask the question “What did we do wrong?”, there is an alarming silence. Where is the outrage that the Catholics are leaving?
- There is a lack of a sense of belonging. In other words: There is a great need to respond to many people’s thirst for God. Many people are filling that thirst with a spirituality that is absent of God. They may identify as “None” in that they do not belong to any organized religion. They are “spirituality without religion”. There are 25 million former Catholics who have left the Church for “spirituality without religion”.

- According to the Pew Research Center (2014):
 1. 50% of millennials who were baptized Catholic no longer call themselves Catholic today
 2. Of the people who leave (the 50%), 79% of those leave before the age of 23
 3. 90% of those that leave the Church, do so by age 29

- What does it mean to be affiliated?
 1. “Language” matters. We need to clarify language and expectations. What do we mean by “being Catholic”? What does it mean to become Catholic or be a practicing Catholic?
 2. We tend not to define it clearly, so people make up their own meaning of what it means to be Catholics
 3. Young people are seeking meaning and identity

- To quote *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... And Rethinking Faith* by David Kinsman, what do we know about the “Nones”?
 1. “Nomads” – 4 out of 10 people who leave the Church and become a None leave for an average of three years. There is dissociation and experimentation, often during their college years
 2. “Prodigals” - 4 out of 10 people who leave the Church and become a None are gone. They claim identity as “ex-Catholics”.
 3. “Exiles” - 5 out of 10 people who leave the Church and become a None are in a period where they are struggling with identity and meaning. They don’t feel at home in the Church. They are wrestling with their identity: “How do I live my faith in a practical way?” They see a disconnect between their spiritual life and their “real” life

- Role of Family: According to a National Study on Youth and Religion, the role of practicing parents and/or mentor: unless a young person who has a parent or mentor who is practicing their faith, they will not remain Catholic.

- One of the main reasons people leave is because their spiritual needs aren’t being met although we mostly think it’s because they want to be “entertained”

- If 50% of our young people have left, how do we reach them?
- They won't come to us and most of us won't go to them. So, we have to find a third place where we can encounter people who have left the Church. Where is that?
- The Internet is a gift because we know that an overwhelming amount of people who have left the Church and re-purposed the gospel are spending an overwhelming amount of time. We know they are gathering there and we can go to them there.
- Just because you cut and copy the parish bulletin, doesn't mean that this form of communication is effective.
- If we are going to reach today's youth we can no longer presume we know how. We must ask them what are the communication structures that they respond to.
- Young people feel that the Church and their parents have abandoned them: they have failed to pass on the legacy of the Church.
- The feedback is overwhelming. This is what youth, especially those that left, are saying to us: "It's not that I didn't believe what they were teaching me, I just couldn't find someone who lived out what they believe."
- **Young people are looking for authenticity in the people who live the faith.**
- Young people feel welcomed in the Church but when they leave, they don't feel missed.
- What are the instances that turn people into the "Nones"? It doesn't seem to be one big moment, it's a slow gradual wearing away of the faith life. They tell us:
 1. "I kind of slowly drifted away."
 2. Many "Nones" still believe that the Church has moral authority.
 3. "Nones" are glad that the Church is finally asking why they left.
 4. "Nones" are spiritual but not religious, they believe in God and moral rules, they just don't follow teachings of the Catholic Church.

- The Mass may not be the entry point of the “None” into the Church. This, of course, is the source and summit of our faith but not the entry way. What is the access point for someone seeking the faith? We must find easier ways for those who have left the church to return. Mass is not the answer to this problem. We must find other ways for them to reengage with us.
- What does the website look like? Is it made for those who are already in the parish or are they aimed at people who just happen upon the site and drawing them in?

Let us now move to reflections from Michael Gormley and his podcast: *Mellinial: A Theological History*. Again, to summarize his reflections:

- The word teenager was invented in the 1930’s
- The 20th century created an awareness of the concept of “adolescence”
- Until then there were “children” and then adults. You were either one or the other. (For example: with “bar mitzvah” you became an adult at 13) This is not the case today.
- The adult culture dominated the world until the 20th century
- In the 1950’s we see the emergence of a full-blown high school culture. Instead of the adult world that children happen to live in, there is the emergence of a “youth culture”. Teens, or the culture that is “teens”, emerge in the 1950s.
- In the 1960’s we see teen riots. They begin to distrust anyone over 30. There is the emergence of two distinct, rival cultures.
- In the 80’s and 90’s there is a flip. Youth culture became the dominant culture in America. There was the rise of the professionalism of children, they are no longer served by coaches and youth ministers, children now serve coaches and youth ministers. Professional children: 6 hours of homework, go to bed at 1:00 am, wake up at 5:00 am. Parents were doing this to them. The youth culture today is nothing like it was in the 80’s and 90’s.
- Youth today have less involvement with their families which studies show (involvement with family) decreases stress and anxiety.

- The youth struggle with an adequate perception of their identity. They live in an online world where they are constantly attacked whether directly by bullying or by the constant threat of their lives not measuring up to the digital portrayal of other people’s lives. They live in an age where identity is fake and one is constantly being judged by an online persona. Youth feel as though they constantly being evaluated as a human person. Anyone’s life is public and online content is permanent. These are the ramifications of the digital life.
- Today, parents are taking kids to all kinds of “things” (dance, faith formation, batting practice) because they want to give them experience and opportunity. Parents think: “I need to give my kid a leg up.” What ends up happening is there are 1st and 2nd graders taking Mandarin because “this is the future”. Today’s youth constantly feel like they are not enough. There is a competition out there to be everything. To be considered “in the top” you have to have above a 4.0. This is insane. This is unhealthy.
- Gormley shares a personal story as he describes a friend of his who is around 40 and how she had a full ride to college for volleyball. They would start practice in October, play the normal season and then when it was over it was “see you next year”. He compares this to middle school football now. To play football in middle school you not only have try out, but you are also expected to work out twice a day. Then, when the season is over, you have to join the track team in order to stay in peak physical shape because you are a “professional.”
- This is destroying young people because they don’t have a family to come home to anymore. Instead, they have a Netflix account, video games, pornography, and other vices to come home to.
- Families are too busy.
- Here are a few key moments in the history of youth ministry in America.
 1. The 1960’s. Billy Graham. He preached to youth for 20+ years. They would dress up in suits, rent out tents and preach about the gospel for up to five hours. Youth poured in. They came because this was the first youth ministry. Youth for Christ and Young Life are part of this movement. They spoke in the youth’s language. They took them seriously. The previous generation did not. Billy Graham saw the division between the two cultures.
 2. 1980’s and 1990’s. There is a consequential tragedy of youth ministry: the “buddy” culture. You want to become their friend to a point that you lose the distinction between adults and teen. This is the age of pizza parties and not much else. The reason why we did this is because this is where youth culture became dominant and we wanted to remain relevant, the cool kid. This was good to a point because you are adopting the culture to which you are evangelizing to.

3. 2000's. The Church knows the "buddy" culture is a bankrupt model. We can now call it a discipleship/mentor model. The adult is the mentor of the youth: be totally involved in the youth culture but don't think for a moment that you are one of them. You are there to do the same thing as the 1960's, transition young people to adulthood.
- Mentor culture is the way of realizing that if I'm going to care about you, I have to actually invest in you.
 - When you talk to lapsed Catholics, it doesn't take long to realize that they don't actually know what the Church teaches. They've been so immersed in the culture and convinced erroneously that they have no room for the real teachings of the Church. They think they've already heard the message and they move on.
 - Post Christian - "It's the kingdom without the king". These are "Progressive Secularists" who are seeking a more just order, just without God. They don't want Jesus, the myth, they want science and technology. They want a steady march of progress.
 - The demise of girl culture. Little girls used to keep diaries. Think about what a diary is, an end of the day reflection on the day's events. This is a spiritual discipline. This has been obliterated by Instagram and other social media apps. We are documenting things as they happen with no reflection.
 - We are no longer fostering reflection in our youth. Take the pic, post it on Instagram and see how many likes you can get. You might reflect on it, but you probably won't.
 - Zygmunt Bauman says: "We don't live in a culture of hard things, we live in a liquid culture. We used to pride ourselves on production and now we pride ourselves of software. There is so much immaterial and intangible things and they change so rapidly that the way we define our identity in a sociological worldview is our relationship to institutes and structures that last. But now they are changing so rapidly and they are immaterial in and of themselves."
 - We cease being pilgrims on a journey and we've become tourists going from fleeting experience to fleeting experience.
 - What happens when you are 7-years old and you get your first iPhone? You play games. You train your mind that entertainment is privately consumed. This has consequences. Technology replaces virtue. In other words: "I don't need to learn chastity, I'll just use a pill or a condom." When technology replaces virtue, you have a whole bunch of people with powerful means in their hands and zero ability to control themselves. Kids with homework that keeps them up until 1:00 am and then go to sleep with their phone on their chest, waking up 30 times a night to respond to text messages. There is no reflection, no self-control, no sense of delayed gratification. It's rigged, it's set up that way. Like a slot machine, designed to give you random rewards in small amounts to keep you hooked.

- Baby boomers ended civic involvement. Their parent's generation was the most civically involved and had the largest church attendance in the history of the United States. The 1980s killed civic involvement. Millennials were raised after the death of civic involvement. Volunteerism and leadership died but monetary gifts have been on the rise. "We want to help but do not want to give our time." Organizations have more money than ever but the least amount of volunteers ever. There is also an extremely low voter turnout because no one wants to get involved anymore.
- We can access entertainment and education individually. We put in our earbuds and 90% of our entertainment comes from little screens.
- The great quest of today is that we get to invent our own meaning. When we say today that God has a plan for you, they respond, "What? Am I a puppet?" The problem with invented meaning is the moment suffering comes, invented meaning has no resources to deal with it.
- In the 80's and 90's, if you were a Christian and were living the Church's sexual ethic, people admired you though they may have thought you were crazy or puritanical. They may have thought it was a little oppressive but there was an admiration there. Now, there is a post-Christian culture. People now think the sexual ethic of Christianity is evil. They don't just think that it is difficult or stringent they think it's immoral because it's bigoted. You aren't being a more moral person, you are being immoral with your heteronormism. People who were really moral but not Christians used to be drawn to Christianity by the goodness and the truth of our moral teaching. Now they are repulsed by it.
- Millennials are disgusted with Christianity because our culture has wedded religious views with political views. The hope of the world does not come from a political party, it's the gospel.
- When we cease to serve both God and mammon, because mammon has kicked us out, we don't have to worry about being cool, we can focus on who we are.
- So, imagine that there are a bunch of young adults whose homes do not foster community or communication, whose friendships are largely digital, and we come to them with some permanent thing, perhaps the only permanent thing left in America: a 2,000 year old, slow to react Church. They can walk into our doors and experience the Mass, no matter where they are in the world, ever ancient, ever new.

- When God spoke to Ezekiel, Ezekiel was with the remnant in Babylon. He was speaking to him about the idolatry of the priesthood back in Jerusalem. The Shekinah Glory Cloud left the temple and came to Babylon. We are in exile from our culture. We are *persona non grata* in universities and halls of power. This is the beautiful thing: We are the new remnant of God. What Christ has enabled us to do is to realize that the mission field is to go outside of myself. We need to realize that we are on mission to a post-Christian culture. The danger of a post-Christian culture is the risk we face of them colonizing Christians. If we don't amplify what is true, good and beautiful in their culture, they'll strip that from us.

- Glimmers of hope:
 1. Basic spiritual disciplines. Get people back into reading scripture, the Liturgy of the Hours, etc. Teach people "how".
 2. Reignite small groups.
 3. Meet them where they are, especially if that place is not religious. He is relational ministry: be interested in them, even if they don't love the Church. Find common ground to build a relationship.

From Joel Stepanek and his reflections: *And Then There Were None*. Again, to summarize:

- **Have No Assumptions.** In the past, there was the assumption that teens leave after high school, go to college, and when they need to get baptized or married, they come back. That doesn't happen anymore. When teens leave, they leave for good. The foundations that we thought were there aren't. They have the basic introductions only. We can't have assumptions about what they do or do not know. We can't have assumptions about their maturity level. We can't assume that what we see on the surface is what we get. We live in a filter mentality culture. Increased technology and screen use is causing higher rates of depression, mental illness and anxiety. There is a correlation between the time spent on screens and lower rates of mental health and the opposite because we were created for community. But teens are good at hiding things from adults. They find ways to put on filters in their lives. We can't assume that the teen in front of us at youth group is doing really well. We can't assume that people are even open to being spiritual. They aren't always religious or spiritual. Unfortunately, 9/11 was an attack by religious fanatics. Pre 9/11, atheists wanted a peaceful truce with religion. Now, in their eyes, religion starts wars. It's bigoted and close minded, a place where people unfortunately seem to be cast out. We can't assume that people have had a positive experience with religion if an experience at all.
- **We Have to Answer Tough Questions.** A young boy 13, goes to his pastor and asks, "If I raise my finger, does God know I was going to do that?" The pastor answers, "Yes, God knows everything." The boy pulls a magazine out of his back pocket with a picture of starving children on it. "Does God know about this?" His pastor answers, "Yes, he knows about this. I know it's hard for you to understand right now, but God knows." The pastor brushes the boy off. This boy is Steve Jobs and that's the last time he went to a Christian church. He asked a tough question that his pastor maybe didn't have time for or didn't take seriously. It was a landmark moment in Steve Jobs' faith. Teens have tough questions and 36% of them believe that they cannot ask those tough questions at Church. Are we ready to answer them? Teens have tough questions and they want to know. We need to be willing to enter into those conversations. We as adults gets nervous because when we enter into those conversations we have to get into what we stand against and that makes us nervous. Focus on what we stand for. People associate religion with "do not". But what do we stand for?
- **Live Joyfully.** Live lives that make teenagers ask why are you so joyful? They are living with higher rates of depression and are seeking joy. It requires something of us. The same way that social media affects our kids, it can affect us. Disconnect. Live like people who have been transformed by the Gospel.
- There is no quick fix. There are people like you and me who are called by God to be missionaries to a teen culture. This can be scary, but today's youth crave the hope that comes from the Gospel.
- Every generation is a product of the generation before it and the culture surrounding it. How many millennials bought into their own participation trophies? None, their parents bought it for them.