

Young People and Faith: some starting points for Religious Educators of the 21st Century

by Brother Benedict Foy

The dawn of the new Millennium offers an ideal opportunity for us as Christian religious educators to take stock of our present situation and to look to where the Lord may be leading us in our ministry. We should consider the effects of the society and environment in which we are working. We need to ask what are the influences that affect the young people we work with, and what insights and opportunities might enable us to re-new our commitment and enthusiasm to the ministry of education? These are important issues at any time. The beginning of the 21st Century provides an added incentive to consider.

Some Difficulties

Significant numbers of students exclude themselves from the traditional Church structures for many reasons. Sometimes it must also be said, the Church at institutional and even at pastoral levels colludes in this, by its lack of sensitivity to young people, enhancing in youth the sense that they are unwelcome in the way they are now!

The general culture of pluralism and individualism, of instant and universal communication and gratification, offers young people many subjective choices and opportunities to change. A sense of eternity, of continuity, of commitment to any vision, values or ideals are therefore often lost to young people attracted by this culture of short-run hedonism.

Family dysfunction is the experience of increasing numbers of young people. This experience often undermines any appreciation of commitment, of their personal sense of identity or of their common humanity. The presence of so few mature models, especially males, contributes to a sense of indifference, isolation or vulnerability -even to the point of fragility - in the lives of many young people.

Many young people perceive that the Church itself is insensitive, authoritarian, irrelevant, non-participatory, ambiguous and didactic. Other structures in society like politics, education and news-media, are viewed in similar ways. Consequently, a sense of ignorance or even scepticism has developed in many young people about these institutions.

The religious "non-practise" and non-involvement example of many adults contributes to indifference regarding faith in young people, which in its turn is exacerbated by peer pressure to appear uninterested in such matters.

Taking the stages of personal development of adolescents and young adults seriously means recognising that feelings are important and that the questioning of identity and relationships is normal. However, religion (like other institutions) expects intellectual acceptance and commitment among its members, and from its different philosophical (deductive) stance it often reacts negatively to questioning. Implicitly, young people recognise that they find it difficult to belong, often 'feeling' disloyal to the Church and to God because of their questioning.

Some Signs of Hope

Many young people have a great attraction to matters of spirituality, of service and of community. For some personal faith and its accompanying values is often due to the influence of one significant person in their lives. Generally the response most often takes the form of involvement in some form of ecstatic worship,

less frequently in the experience of satisfying service or a strong sense of being welcomed into a community of believers.

Religious 'sound bites' (of 'Footprints in the Sand' type) are influential, especially at times of crisis for many young people.

For young Christians in the USA and in Great Britain, Jesus is often seen as 'brother', 'lover' or 'companion' before he is seen as 'Lord'.

In Europe and to a lesser extent in USA, though rarely in Britain, there is some increasing recognition, at least among some young adults, of the religious heritage and its influence on the pervading culture of the society.

In Britain, and the USA too, there appears to be a search under way among some groups of young people and young families in particular, for a new sense of being a believer, a community, a church. These movements owe little allegiance to the main-line churches.

Although many young people appear overtly to be non-practising members of the Church - 'feeling' no need for it, having had no 'experience of God' through it, apparently being apathetic, they often report praying. Their prayer is often petitionary - for themselves and for others in need with whom they can identify themselves.

Other young people are attracted to New Age or Eastern Religions. These young people tend to be older students. However, their thinking is emotive rather than rigorous. This allows for the adoption of a pot-pourri type of personal religion drawn from all religions. (Sometimes, the adoption of such life-styles is more a statement about being different - or shocking - than one of commitment. For others, involvement in the cults has the same intention, although financial or hedonistic inducements are also attractive.)

Some Observations about these Situations

For many young people who are attracted to evangelical, fundamentalist and pentecostal groups, personal security is a strong motivator, although some who are 'emotionally needy' may deny their personal problems. Nevertheless, the experience of adults modelling a living faith is very attractive to young people. Even if the modelling is based on a simple or anti-intellectual appreciation of Scripture, and even if there is no sacramental life and poor theology, such faith can touch the hearts of young people by its authenticity. The shared personal experience of Jesus as Lord enhances the personal identity of the young people. This in turn leads to a deepening life of prayer which contrasts starkly with the intellectual and moral commitment of many adult Catholics. The sense of community, with opportunities for sharing of faith and witnessing to other people, whether they are young or old, touches many young people, giving them a sense of connectedness, of responsibility and of worth.

Whilst these experiences are valuable to young people, several long-term dangers may be involved. Sometimes the very support of the small group can so possess young people that they become cut off from an open relationship with people who are not members of their particular community. The fact that such groups sometimes fall apart when leaders change is outside the short-term experience of young people. This can be damaging in terms of long term commitment, especially for those less-well educated. Sadly, too, in many of these groups the young people miss out on the wider issues of justice and ecumenism, which objectively can distort the values of Christianity.

These reflections on the present situation seem to point to the development of a diluted, marginalised, inconsistent and amorphous identity and faith; even among young people who describe themselves as Christians or who remain open to questions of faith. Others see Jesus as neither a personal saviour nor saviour of the world and think Church's role is only human and marginally important in the world. These represent the bulk of the young people in our schools. Many schools also find significant minorities of other faiths rep-

resented among their students, frequently with similar difficulties around the questions of faith and practise, and which are sometimes exacerbated by cultural considerations.

Some Thoughts looking to the Future.

What response can Christian educators make to this situation? What response should they make?

As Pope Paul VI said, religious educators, catechists and indeed all adult members of a school community, need to provide good, varied and positive models and witnesses to faith. They need to be people who are positive and open to the world, to culture, to religion and to the ambiguities they contain. They need to be people who can 'accompany' or who can walk alongside young people — because they are willing to walk this way themselves. (How many staff in Catholic schools were even asked about their willingness to take this role during their interview process?)

As schools are almost the only places where young people can encounter the Church, evangelisation - the invitation to young people to know Jesus as Lord personally and through the community - urgently needs to be undertaken by the adults.

Building on the invitation to consider Jesus as Lord the experience of an on-going community must also be offered to young people. This experience of community will need to address the personal valuing of each young person, as well as the social element, the participative worshipping element of Church, and particularly - as a counter to many of the negative experiences of their lives - experiences of forgiveness, healing and growth.

Adults and young people need and appreciate opportunities to share their faith, of their experience in life. Young people need to be helped in this way to recognise the presence of God within their own experiences of life - and especially in the areas of pain and difficulties. As part of their human as well as part of their Christian or religious development young people need to be offered opportunities for collaborative service, for responsibility, and to be involved in making 'the world a better place'. Such opportunities support the idealism and even the altruism and compassion of so many young people.

Invitation and participation in celebratory liturgies are other external supports for developing the faith of young people who are so often marginalised by the worshipping community of the Church. Recognition of the implicit sense of the spiritual in the lives of young people can be encouraged by invitations to talk about and to contribute their insights into spirituality towards the growth of the school community.

Knowing students as people permits the development of a catechesis built of the personal experiences of the students themselves, and on their awareness of the other students, teachers and adults, and to use approaches with which they can easily identify. Developing a good scriptural education would appear to be a priority before any dogmatic theological teaching within the context of formal religious education. Positive and relevant teaching about revelation, Christology and ecclesiology which is inclusive and respectful of other Christian and religious traditions also needs to be put in place.

A methodology of Christian and religious education which includes reflection, collaboration, creative and active components as well as discussion and academic approaches facilitates the 'touching of hearts' which is an essential aspect of developing faith. Above all, adults working with young people in the arena of faith today need to invite them to commitment and to not require conformity from them.

All these suggestions require a great sensitivity on the part of Christian educators to their particular group of students; dedication to address the issues; and courage to live with the difficulties and ambiguities which will surround any efforts they undertake in this ministry. However, positive and Christian views of self and others will be conveyed. Empathy and compassion in dealing with people, recognising the presence of God in the persons of the students within classes, could become the norm for such a school of faith. The adults will be seen as educated, participatory witnesses to the reconciling presence of Christ in the world - whilst remaining personally vulnerable through being 'critical friends' to the young people and 'loyal opposition' from within to the Church. As Christian educators they will continue to offer 'micro-experiences of faith and

of Church' to the young people. A community of such Christian educators creates a 'beacon Christian school' which will shine out as a self-confident community and which reaches out to others. As Christian educators they will be accepting their role as 'ambassadors of Christ' and 'preparers of the ground' in which the Lord can 'make the increase'.

Such ideals need to be held by Christian educators alongside the reality of our ministerial environment. They need to be restated regularly. They need to challenge us regularly. The start of a new Millennium seems to be the ideal opportunity for these tasks. How are we going to respond?