

KEEPING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE

main thoughts from the Diocesan Council of Laity, 12th November 2005

- ‘Young people’ in our discussion meant teenagers and young adults, rather than children of primary school age. There are lots of young people already very much involved across our diocese, and at Mass most Sundays.
- **We recognise the pressures on young people today, perhaps far more than in the past.** There are pressures of work, but also social and cultural pressures all of which militate against involvement in the Church as something which is just not ‘cool’. We need pro-actively to counter this. How?
- **Many young people stop coming to Mass when they go through a change of lifestyle.** This includes leaving school for university, new relationships, etc. However, if a strong enough sense of belonging is developed before this happens, young people will often return to their parish when they come home, and return later to active membership of the Church. It is good if the Church can keep in contact in some way with those who go to university (newsletters, e-mail, etc), as well as giving them whatever help they need to establish new church contacts at their place of study. This should be a natural desire for any family – whether home, parish or diocese.
- **Active & participatory parishes are more likely to keep their young people – and the rest of us!**
- **‘Invitation’ and ‘Momentum’ are key.** Young people should be invited in the right way by the right people to be involved in the life, worship and work of the church at every level. Once invited and involved, the momentum needs to be kept going.
- **Why do we want your young people to come to church anyway?** Because the Mass remains the heart of our Catholic life and identity. Our parishes are the poorer without the presence of our young people, and they miss out of the fullness of the mystery of the Eucharist by being absent.
- **Why do young people join the evangelical churches?** This is something we should explore with care. It is not just about livelier music. They have a strong sense of identity, and ‘safety in numbers’. What can we learn from such Christian communities without in any way losing our Catholic identity? Can local parishes dialogue with such communities?
- **The parish priest remains key!** If he creates a youth-friendly environment, above all by his own personal and positive welcome and encouragement to young people, then they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and worth. Sadly, some priests can be stumbling blocks to the involvement of young people by their attitudes.
- **The personal example and support of parents & grandparents is vital.** Although many young people react against the values of their parents as part of their growth in independence, there is little doubt that growing up in the midst of a loving, faithful and forgiving Catholic family which worships and prays together makes a tremendous difference.
- **The active and enabling cooperation of parents is essential.** Parents themselves may need more support in keeping their children involved in the life of the Church. Overall, the Church should do far more to value and support parenting. *(There are useful parenting courses available for parents with teenagers, appropriate for a Catholic setting)*
- **Too much cannot be asked of our Catholic secondary schools.** The blame is too easily given to them for the lapsation of Catholic young people, but our schools can only nourish what is given to them. Many young people from our Catholic schools are involved in church life.
- **Let’s ask our young people what they want.** We need to trust our young people, and give them the opportunity to say what they would like to do. Perhaps each parish, cluster and/or deanery could organise a gathering at which they could express their thoughts. This needs to be carefully organised for it to be as fruitful as possible.
- **Especially in a scattered and far-flung diocese like East Anglia, young Catholics can feel very isolated.** There is safety in numbers, and we need to provide opportunities for them to come together. In large parishes, this can happen locally. For others, gathering in clusters and deaneries can help, along with diocesan events and national and international gatherings (e.g. Taize, World Youth Day). There is also a place for getting together with other young Christians on an ecumenical basis, without undermining the sense of belonging that comes from being part of a distinctive Catholic group.

- **Some young people need a forum in which they can ask all the questions they have about their faith and the Church.** How can we best provide such a forum?
- **What can our young people do for the parish? Young people should be encouraged to be actively involved in ordinary parish Sunday Masses, welcomed as equals alongside adults.** They should be invited to be Readers, Lay Ministers of Holy Communion (anyone in School Year 10 and above who has been confirmed may be a Minister of Communion), Altar Servers, members of choirs and other music groups, welcomers, offertory bearers, collectors, etc.
- **There is also a place, however, for celebrations of Mass in which young people are the prime focus.** See Appendix 3 on 'Youth Masses' in the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* (pp. 67-68).
- **Music remains important for young people at Mass.** Pope John Paul asked that every Sunday Mass be clearly a celebration of Easter! That in itself would get many parishes to take a fresh look at the choice of music for Mass – and the speed at which it is sung! But special consideration goes need to be given to the musical tastes of young people, which can range from good quality modern music to Taize.
- **Social events for young people are important.** Often all young people want is somewhere to gather and spend time together, in a friendly and unthreatening setting. Occasional special events (e.g. trips to theme-parks, ice-skating, karting, sports events, theatre, cinema) also help to keep together our diocesan three-fold recipe for youth work: 'Faith, Food and Fun'.
- **Young people often readily respond to justice and peace issues.** How can we get them actively involved in Traidcraft, Cafod, diocesan twinnings with Cambodia and the Holy Land, parish projects for the local needy and overseas links, etc?
- **We now have many young Catholic people from immigrant communities.** These include Filipinos, Indians, Portuguese, etc. Parishes should be pro-active in including such young people. Some parishes (e.g. St Philip Howard, Cambridge) have been particularly fruitful in involving Filipino young people, especially in music at Mass.
- **Better communication is essential,** not only from the diocese, but also at parish level in reception and use of that communication. Electronic communication could be better used (within Child Protection guidelines).
- **What is absolutely essential for the development of diocesan youth events is pro-active support, encouragement and enabling of such events at parish level.** This means having people in parishes prepared to push the events, and perhaps arrange transport, etc. This is something which lay people need to take on, working closely with Hamish MacQueen, Director of our Diocesan Youth Service.
- **There is room for communication directed to young people themselves.** This might include parish and diocesan newsletters, websites, etc.
- **Getting young-ish adults (including early middle-aged) involved in youth work and leadership is often very difficult, and yet without such people youth work cannot thrive.** Recent child abuse scandals and child protection procedures have undoubtedly discouraged some people from offering themselves.
- **How can we best get young people involved in our parish structures?** Some parishes include older young people as members of Parish Pastoral Councils, but that does not always work. Larger parishes might consider establishing a Parish Youth Council on much the same lines as the Diocesan Youth Council; such a body could then report back to the Parish Pastoral Council on an occasional basis.
- Although most parishes cannot afford to **pay for a Youth Coordinator/Worker,** would there be a possibility of some clusters or deaneries sharing resources in order to provide a suitable person working locally with young people, perhaps in close collaboration with Catholic high schools?
- **Not all parishes have suitable facilities for youth activities. Is there room for better ties with other local churches, sharing resources ecumenically?**
- **We need a 'multi-pronged approach' to keeping our young people. In the end, however, all must be rooted in prayer which bears fruit in action.**

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