

The Adolescent Catechist as Amateur Anthropologist and Cultural Analyst: Engaging Teen Culture for Effective Ministry

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I have always enjoyed people watching. Sitting down in a public space and observing how human beings interact with one another is an activity that can entertain and educate me for hours. When my wife and I visit a new city, we become amateur anthropologists, noting the variety of ways that human beings in the city experience life in community. What are common topics of conversation in this city? What type of stores and restaurants are present in the downtown area? What cultural events are advertised in the local newspaper? The questions that we ask about any city are as infinite as our desire to know. And the answers to these questions give us a glimpse, however partial, into a community's understanding of itself, its deepest values, and commitments.

In my own work with adolescents in a variety of catechetical programs, I often employ the eye of an amateur anthropologist and cultural analyst. During youth group mission trips, weekly gatherings, classroom interactions, and youth leader meetings, I have noticed some distinct cultural trends among today's adolescents. These trends are not hard and fast rules applicable to each setting in the United States. Instead, they provide a glimpse into the way that some contemporary American, Catholic teenagers make sense of the world. I recognize that each person who reads this reflection will have others, perhaps more valid for the setting to which they minister. They may also disagree with my analysis of some of these trends. A great deal of my amateur anthropology and social analysis as a minister has taken place within the context of primarily white, middle to upper class, religious education classrooms. It is my hope that this reflection, while particular to my own observations and intellectual

development as a catechist and minister, may lead to a similar cultural analysis on the part of each catechist and minister to adolescents in this country. It is also my hope to introduce some key questions to consider as this Initiative moves forward. Understanding these trends, or others particular to the minister's own social context, is essential if the catechist desires to foster inculturation of the gospel in the deepest roots of teenage culture.¹

Trend 1: Most Teenagers, If Not All, Are Influenced by Technology and Entertainment

I asked the middle school students if they had any other questions about me, their teacher, since I had recently asked about their own activities and families during the first day of class. One of the girls raised her hand and wanted to know what type of cell phone that I had. While such a question might strike many of us as bizarre (certainly not a question that one would ask on a job interview or a first date), for this young woman the question about my choice of a cell phone was essential to knowing something about me. My cell phone was an extension of my identity.

The value placed on technology in adolescent culture cannot be overemphasized. Teens communicate with one another through text messaging and status updates on popular social networks, such as Facebook. When walking somewhere, adolescents are frequently accompanied by their own personal soundtrack: an MP3 player that allows them to control the mood of the day through the click of a button. Several hours each day are spent before a computer screen, moving from one Internet site to the next.

This technological revolution is having an effect upon the way that adolescents think and understand the world. As Smith and Denton write, "The digital communication revolution . . . accelerates the trend begun with the advent of television away from typographic-based, linear, rational thought and discourse and toward noncognitive, image-based, entertainment-centered public discourse."² If once it was pedagogically astute to utilize images and other media in a classroom, it has now become a required component of human communication. This is the reality of our times, whether we like it or not. And we can use it as catechists. Whenever I teach adolescents, I use a PowerPoint presentation, filled with videos, text, images, and music in order to engage each of the senses during the presentation.

Still, the technological revolution, if not critically examined, may lead to a deeper spiritual malaise. An article in *Atlantic Monthly* highlights the means by which the rise of the Internet has led to a change in the way that we think, both as teenagers and adults. On the Internet, our attention is fractured, such that we have a difficult time giving full attention to contemplative activities, such as reading.³ Even as I am writing this brief reflection, I have two web pages open, a PDF file, and a word processor program. The ability to attend to that which is directly in front of me, has become increasingly difficult in an age in which I might have all that I immediately desire, moving from one thing to the next with a click of a mouse.

I have noticed this trend in adolescents in subtle ways. First, whenever students are listening to music, they engage with the song for no more than two or three minutes, before asking to listen to another song. As soon as the song has lost its value of entertaining, the students move on from it to another form of entertainment. Second, they are exceedingly uncomfortable with silence. A number of the teens, who participated in a ten-minute solitary prayer walk, confessed to Kara, the youth minister of the parish, that they felt genuine anxiety at the possibility of ten minutes of quiet contemplation. Third, though technology has led to more communication between human beings, often it leads to a decrease in bodily

presence. Walking around a college campus, I am always shocked to see the number of young people walking by friends and classmates, all the while talking on their cell phones, their eyes never meeting one another.

This fractured, bodiless attention undoubtedly affects the religious lives of teens. To contemplate, to give one's full attention to a liturgical activity or prayer, becomes quite hard in an age in which the senses are trained to move so quickly from one object of interest to the next.⁴ Yet, it is not impossible. One of the reasons that I believe that Eucharistic Adoration is so popular among Catholic teenagers is that the experience of contemplative prayer in adoration provides an outlet for the fractured attention that is a part of both adult and teen culture. Christ's presence in the Eucharist is so real to these teens, because of the simplicity of the symbol, which allows some teens to encounter God through bread, song, Scripture, and community.

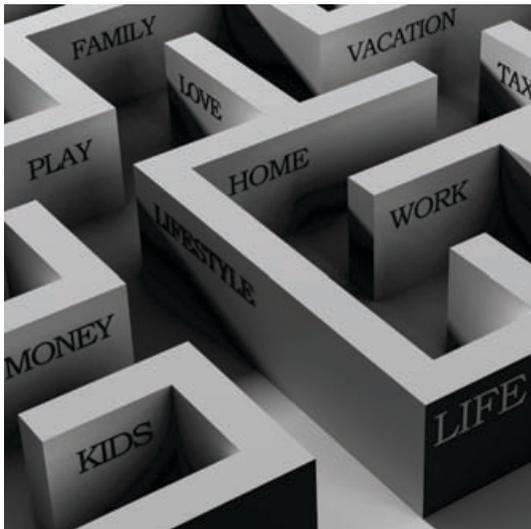
Still, our technological culture may also serve as a hindrance to the next step, service to the world. The Internet, television, movies, music: All of these outlets can be passive media, filling us with information and wonder and entertainment, leaving us sufficiently content. When I watch the latest video on Funnyordie.com by Will Ferrell, I am enormously amused. Yet, as the video ends, nothing more is required of me than laughter and perhaps sharing the moment with friends through e-mail. In the same way, contemplation in a technological culture can easily become a moment of entertainment, of delight in God's presence, with little expectation of action. In this instance, adoration is nothing more than a passive moment, perhaps a very entertaining and moving liturgical experience of watching Christ.

In a technological and entertainment culture, the line between inspiration and entertainment is one that is difficult to measure. In contemporary Catholic youth ministry I see this line as a tension that will require some critical reflection for those who work with adolescents. At the recent World Youth Day pilgrims were met not only by Pope Benedict XVI but also a potpourri of merchandise, including the official Ugg boots of this festive gathering. At countless youth conferences I have

seen mass-produced t-shirts with messages such as, “Jesus is my homeboy,” an expression that mixes a trendy phrase with the incarnate God-person. Youth ministers and catechists use the latest clip from YouTube as a way of introducing the message to be conveyed during the particular religious education class or youth night. In using the very means of entertainment and technology that are so essential to youth culture, are adolescent catechists helping to inculcate the very consumer and entertainment habits that are antithetical to traditional religious practice?⁵ Evangelization is more than providing a suitable and persuasive vehicle for conveying a message, but the transformation of the whole person and world in light of the Gospel of Christ, an interior change manifested in a new way of seeing the world.⁶

Trend 2: Many Adolescents Are Driven by the Desire to Succeed in Athletics, Academics, and Interpersonal Relationships

Popular culture frequently depicts teenagers as paragons of the vice of sloth. The weekly comic strip *Zits*, for example, tells the story of Jeremy, a hapless teenager whose only interests are sleep, the consumption of vast quantities of food, and the occasional date with his on-again, off-again girlfriend. School is an obstacle to true delight: The hours spent in perfect leisure in front of the television or playing a video game on his cell phone.



While there is indeed some truth in this characterization of teen culture, my own experience of adolescent life contradicts the popular slacker teenager. I believe this is particularly true when ministering to Catholics, who as Smith and Denton comment, are more likely to attend college than most of the United States population.⁷ In countless conversations with adolescents throughout this country I have discovered young people who are dedicated to succeed in academics, athletics, and interpersonal relationships. High school students begin to speak about their dream colleges their freshman year and taking courses that prepare them for the application process. They also participate in an array of athletic and extracurricular activities on a daily basis leaving little leisure time during the week. In relationships, adolescents are required to excel in both friendship and romantic relationships.

Last year *The New York Times* wrote an article on the high school to which most of the young people in my parish attend. The article analyzed the lofty expectations imposed on women in this school who are required to be phenomenal athletes, capable of the highest intellectual thought, while simultaneously being “effortlessly hot.”⁸ One of the young women interviewed, after being accepted at a number of great public universities throughout this country, shared with the interviewer her list of goals. The article reads:

She wants: To write a novel. Own a (red) Jeep Wrangler. Get into college. Name her firstborn daughter Carmen. Go to carnival in Rio de Janeiro. Learn to surf. Live in a Spanish-speaking country. Learn to play the doppio movimento of Chopin’s Sonata in B Flat. Own a dog. Be a bridesmaid. Vote for president. Write a really good poem. Never get divorced.⁹

In other words, this young woman desires success in everything that she attempts to accomplish both intellectually and personally. I have seen this same drive for perfection in the students in my own parish. When asked about topics that we might discuss for the upcoming year the students offered an educational program so ambitious that it would cause some universities to blush. They wanted

to discuss science and religion, raise money for hurricane relief, and address the problem of suffering in the world. They were interested in body image, politics and faith, and interfaith dialogue. The program they set was phenomenal, and they were more than willing to take leadership responsibility in carrying out discussions and activities around these topics.

Yet, perhaps this culture of success and constant activity is detrimental to the religious life of Catholic teenagers. In a recent collection of essays on communities that successfully educate the young in religious traditions, Brother John of Taizé speaks about the thousands of practicing teens that flock to this small French community over the course of a summer for an experience of monastic life.¹⁰ Perhaps one way of explaining why so many teens enjoy the experience of Taizé is the opportunity to live a simpler life free from the constant expectations of success and perfection advocated in our culture. As Brother John says, “Paradoxically, perhaps, the set organization of the prayer favors the creation of an open space where body, mind, and heart are liberated.”¹¹ In a culture of such stress inducing success, I sometimes question if the most important lesson that I might teach some of the teens is simply how to rest and delight in a relationship with God.

Second, one wonders if the ambition that our teenagers have inherited from parents, teachers, and other adult role models leads ultimately to happiness. For the most part, a great deal of pressure for success is placed on these teens, not by their own conscious decision, but through the influence of adult mentors, particularly parents, who desire the best for their child in the long run. Quoting Virginia Portmann, parents read to their young “the Dr. Seuss book *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* and create bumper stickers telling the world their child is an honor student. American parents today expect their children to be perfect—the smartest, fastest, most charming people in the universe.”¹² When I was teaching a confirmation class last year on Christian vocation I was surprised to see the students in awe to learn that God desired, above all else, not that they be rich, successful, attractive, or athletic but fully themselves, living a truly happy life consisting of

love of God and neighbor. It turns out that God is not an admissions counselor or a potential interviewer for one’s dream job. Rather God delights in our flourishing, our own happiness. In light of this intense culture of accomplishments, such lessons of leisure may be the greatest new apologetic that the adolescent catechist can offer for teens today.¹³

Trend 3: Many Adolescents Are Dedicated to Service, the Common Good, and Tolerance as a Part of Their Religious Observance.

Youth ministers and high school teachers are quite cognizant of the care and concern for the other manifested by adolescents. In my own youth group there are ten people on a waiting list for our mission trip. This is an event in which fifty high school students from our parish will spend eight hours a day performing intensive manual labor in the summer heat while sleeping on the floor of a nonair-conditioned school. Outside of informing the students of the date in which registration will take place, there is no advertising for this trip. Rather, the teens in our youth group wait for this event each year with bated breath, informing their friends that they have to go to work camp because “it’s wicked ill.” The power of this trip is not simply that they get to spend a week together away from the cares and concerns that press upon them in daily life and spending the evening in the delightful leisure. Rather, they are deeply moved by the love that they feel for the residents to whom they provide assistance.

Such care for the other is not reserved for direct service alone. During the election season of 2008, a number of our high school students expressed their dismay that they were not able to participate in the election process. They wished that they were able to vote for their candidate, because they genuinely believed that he might create a

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better world. Whether the students were supporting John McCain or Barack Obama, they demonstrated a remarkable trust in the power of government to effect good within society. They trust in the power of systematic change.

In addition, high school adolescents are quite tolerant of those who are different, even to the point of celebrating difference as a virtue. At a recent high school graduation I listened as the international students of the high school greeted those gathered on this momentous day in their respective languages. The primary virtue extolled during this graduation in the various speeches delivered was tolerance, the recognition that the one who is different is an important part of a community and will contribute for the benefit of society in a unique way.

In many ways compassionate service—the desire to participate in democratic institutions for the common good—and tolerance are not new phenomena among the young. The activism of the 1960s so prevalent on college campuses demonstrated that the young were interested in political organization, service to society, and openness to the other.¹⁴ While 1960s activism was anti-authoritarian—a rebellion against “parental” authority of any kind—contemporary teens have a remarkable trust in the power of institutions to assist in this social change. For many of the teens in my youth group, their interest in service and social change comes directly from their religious affiliation within the Catholic Church. While teens frequently struggle to articulate faith claims in their lives, they have little trouble expressing the importance of service to the other and tolerance.¹⁵ They see these very public democratic virtues as a necessary requirement of being Catholic, even more so than belief in any particular doctrine or dogma.

This awareness and concern for the other, as well as the trust in institutions to carry out change, is a remarkable feature of teen culture today. Teens are observing their Catholic faith, whether they are fully aware of it or not, through direct service to the poor and tolerance of the other. In this feature of teen culture adolescent catechists have a unique opportunity to foster a Catholic identity rooted in the fullness of the tradition through offering opportunities to reflect upon these service experiences in light of the depths of Catholic tradition. I truly believe that teens are open to studying and learning about

Catholicism through an encounter with Catholic Social Teaching and transformation through service. They are willing to learn from an institution the ways that it has understood service and diversity. Also, they may experience an enrichment of democratic virtues, such as tolerance, by educating them about the ethics of love, so prevalent in the history of Catholicism. In other words, it is not enough for catechists to provide service experiences for teens since this is part and parcel of teen culture, even outside the religious sphere. A reflection on this service, through the Catholic lens, will help to inculcate Catholic teaching in their lives such that they will bring this Catholic perspective on service, politics, and tolerance to the public sphere.

These three trends are not the only ones that an amateur anthropologist might isolate. Nevertheless, I believe these three features of teen culture are prevalent enough that reflection upon them might be beneficial for our common work as adolescent catechists. I also believe that this type of cultural analysis—informed by a diversity of disciplines—including sociology, history, philosophy, and theology may work as a model for catechists who minister in a quite different setting than myself.

Author

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