

Young adults and ‘secrets of the heart’

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Over the past year America’s bishops have talked a lot about religious freedom. The reason is simple. The current White House, and many others in our nation’s leadership classes, have a very different understanding of religious liberty from what our country’s Founders intended. And that has implications for the future.

As a result, I’ve thought a great deal about St. Thomas More. As a poet, scholar, statesman, lawyer, husband and father, Thomas More was respected throughout England and across Europe. He was a friend of Erasmus. He was a trusted adviser to Henry VIII. In the end though, he was also a martyr for his Catholic convictions. He died for refusing to accept the legitimacy of Henry’s marriage to Anne Boleyn and for rejecting the king’s claim of supremacy over the Church in England.

Robert Bolt captured More’s courage in his wonderful play, *A Man for All Seasons*. More was a real saint, and so — like us — he was made of human clay. In his prison cell, More often struggled with fear and doubt. The person who sustained him in his distress, more than anyone else, was his daughter Meg. As with all his children, More had played a personal role in Meg’s education. They were very close, a natural complement of minds. In their last meeting before his execution, More embraced her and said, “You alone have long known the secrets of my heart.” As a father and tutor, More had raised Meg to be an articulate, confident, supremely gifted Christian woman; a published female author at a time when that distinction was extremely rare. In one sense, her life was More’s greatest achievement.

We revere the witness of Thomas More because we know his story. But the reason we know his story is the courage of his daughter Meg. It was Meg who refused to be bullied by the men who judicially murdered her father. It was Meg who secretly collected his letters and other writings. And it was Meg who made sure that his materials were published and that her father’s story would not be forgotten — all this from a woman in her 20s when her father died.

Of course, that was 500 years ago. Times are different now; though maybe not as different as we’d like to think. Nonetheless, the importance of forming intelligent, committed young adults, as Thomas More inspired and formed his daughter, is the

same today as it was then. Because most of you here today work with young people at a decisive time in shaping the direction of their lives, you have one of the most vital missions in the Church.

Your situations are obviously very diverse. Each campus is unique: secular or Catholic, urban or rural, commuter or non-commuter. Some of you serve at huge state schools, others at small private colleges. But all of you share one common pastoral problem: popular culture. The shape of today's mass culture is different from anything the Church has faced in past decades. And for better or worse, it influences all of our campus outreach.

You know today's environment as well as I do. Sunday Mass attendance has declined along with other sacramental indicators. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life have dropped. Marriage and family life suffer from crippling divorce rates; fewer people are actually getting married; and even marriage itself is being redefined.

Over the past five decades, we've moved from a culture permeated by religious faith to a culture that seems increasingly indifferent or cynical toward religion in general and Christianity in particular. Many Americans no longer claim any formal religious affiliation. And as Notre Dame's distinguished social research scholar Christian Smith has shown, vast numbers of American young adults are, in effect, morally illiterate. They're not "bad" people — far from it. But they often lack the moral vocabulary and roots in a living religious tradition that would enable them to reason independently through complex ethical problems. They believe in God, but in a generic, feel-good deism sense, with God's main job reduced to giving them what they want when they want it.

At a minimum, this implies a massive failure of catechesis and young adult ministry, not to mention personal witness, on the part of my own generation. And I don't think many of the men and women my age in the Church are really willing to admit that yet. But the results aren't good. The results don't lie, and now we need to deal with the consequences.

Christian Smith names six main factors that shape today's landscape for emerging adults.

The *first* factor is a dramatic growth in higher education, driven in part by the need to compete for adequately paying, higher skilled jobs. This has extended schooling for many young adults and delayed their engagement in work-world duties. Many new graduates also carry a heavy student debt load at a very early stage of adulthood.

The *second* factor is delayed marriage. On average, young people marry about six years later than half a century ago — if they marry at all. This has implications for personal maturity and social stability. The *third* factor involves shifts in the economy that have made traditional, long-term careers more difficult. The *fourth* factor is related to the third: In light of today's financial insecurity, parents often extend support to their adult

children well into their 20s and 30s. The *fifth* factor is birth control, widely used by married and unmarried people alike. This has obvious and very serious implications for young adult sexual behavior, mental and physical health, abortion rates and even sexual identity issues.

Smith's *sixth* factor is the trickle-down effect of academic theories like postmodernism on mainstream American culture; theories that celebrate uncertainty, fluid identities and ambiguity, and thereby undermine classic moral norms and a stable understanding of the human person and society.

I'd also add a *seventh* factor to Smith's list of things shaping today's young adult landscape: radical advances in communication technology that alter the way young people think, relax and relate.

All of these factors complicate our task of sharing the faith. Yet too often in the Church we've held on to the same institutional patterns of organization, the same methods of preaching and teaching that worked in a religion-friendly past, but can't and *don't* work in a "post-Christian" mission culture.

We're left with a terrain dotted by weakened Catholic forms that not only fail in their mission but also stand – without intending it– as a counter-witness to the faith. Young people in search of meaning won't choose Jesus Christ if they constantly encounter a faith life of worn-out structures in various stages of decline.

Renewing Catholic life is crucial to convincing young people to open their hearts to the Christian faith. Young adults themselves need to help carry out this renewal. The work of bringing new life to the Church and the work of reaching out to young adults can't be understood separately. Emerging adults are not merely one constituency among many in the Church. They're the future of Catholic life in flesh and blood, the key to triggering a chain reaction of conversion and new zeal.

I want to turn for a moment to three examples from Scripture that might help us better understand our current situation and the scope of our task in the years ahead: the daughter of Jairus, the Rich Young Man, and the boy in the Gospel of John's account of the multiplication of loaves and fishes.

The first example, the story of Jairus' daughter, is found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. The daughter was young; Luke places her age at around 12. But in the culture of her time, she was already approaching womanhood. In the first century A.D., marriage was common for girls in their early teens, followed very quickly by child-bearing and the burdens of managing a household. So she wasn't at all distant from some of the adult realities that begin to press in upon today's college-age students.

Jairus says, "My little daughter is at the point of death" (Mk. 5:23), and he could be speaking to us right here, right now, today. Millions of Catholic parents whisper some version of that line in their hearts every Sunday as they watch their children drift away

from the Church. So many of our young adults are absent from our parishes. Many may seem happy, and many enjoy great physical health — but they're wasting away in their souls because they're disconnected from the only community that guarantees life — community with Jesus Christ.

The words of Jairus are the same words we offer on behalf of our young people. To Jesus we say, "Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live." Come Lord and give that abundant life that reaches through the centuries in the concreteness of the Church. Come and awaken young people by your healing touch. This is the central challenge of our time: to give life to a new generation of young adults; to offer the Church to them with new and compelling passion, not merely as an institution or a collection of moral rules, but as the living presence of Jesus Christ — a source of joy and life.

One of the main goals of the Second Vatican Council was to advance the Church as the sacrament of Christ in the world. A sacrament is, as we all remember, an outward sign, instituted by Jesus, to give grace. A *vibrant* Church, a *vigorous and mission-oriented* Church, radiates the presence of Jesus to others and gives us a share of Christ's life and love.

That leads to my second example from Scripture: the story of the Rich Young Man.

Vatican II optimistically assumed that the visible Church would serve as a lamp, drawing the modern world out of darkness into God's light. But the story of the Rich Young Man seems to refute that optimism. The Gospel's Young Man is a person of obvious good intentions. He encounters the Son of God not through signs or stories or hearsay, but in person, face to face — and yet he still chooses to walk away from the light. *Why?* How is that possible?

The answer to that question, then and now, is exactly the same. Each of us has free will. We all have different opportunities and carry different burdens, but in the end, rich or poor, we each freely choose the kind of person we become. Selfishness is powerful. Darkness has its own strong appeal. And the world is filled with distractions and addictions.

The Rich Young Man is not evil. On the contrary, he wants the good; he yearns for perfection. That's what makes his story so moving. But he lacks the courage to give up those final comforts that tie him to the world and keep him from real holiness — and if the Rich Young Man rejects Jesus Christ face to face, how can we flawed disciples ever hope to do better with young people submerged in a modern culture of noise and addiction?

Young adulthood is a pivotal time in every human life. Young people are idealistic. Young people want to make a difference. And therein lies our reason to hope. Regardless of distractions and obstacles, detours and traps, young people in every age do resonate with a longing for greatness, which means they can be reached.

The idealism, striving and seeking in the hearts of so many young adults instinctively order them toward God. No matter how black the darkness is, no matter how deep the cultural confusion, no matter how ignorant persons are of the Creator who made them, young adults at their core long to give themselves to Someone higher than themselves. Augustine was right 1,600 years ago, and he's still right today: Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

To put it in very practical terms: Campus ministers have plenty of reasons to re-examine, critique and challenge their methods, but they have no reason at all to lose hope. The work you do matters eternally because each human soul you touch is immortal. For every Rich Young Man who turns away from Christ, there's another young woman or man who longs for something more than this world can give – something deeper, richer and lasting. A single fruitful encounter with Jesus Christ can engage the deepest aspirations and change the entire course of a young adult's life. And a single, transformed life can set dozens of others on fire with the same love of God.

Campus ministry needs to lead young adults not just to good religious activities that keep them busy, but also to the beauty of interior silence that enables a person to hear the will of God and entrust his or her life to Jesus Christ.

That's the great power of reflective prayer, and especially Eucharistic Adoration. When it's done well, as a central pillar in the life of a campus ministry, Eucharistic Adoration leads people into the living presence of God's love. One of our Newman Center chaplains in Philadelphia told me of a student who had just finished her time before the Blessed Sacrament. She said to him, "Father, I don't know if I'm guilty of some sort of heresy, but when I'm before the Blessed Sacrament, I really imagine Jesus loving me more than me loving him." That young woman wasn't wrong. She was given a gift. She felt the tangible power of God's love and was moved by it.

Of course, where the grace of God abounds, the devil is usually active as well. Christian ministries and communities that become tepid or routine can be breeding grounds for immaturity. People in general and young adults in particular can easily begin to use their faith as a comfortable clubhouse or shelter from the world.

We only fool ourselves if we think that a mere gathering of young people is a sign of good ministry. Religious groups, like any other group, can be cliquish, self-indulgent, lazy and fruitless, heavy on talk and light on real conversion and mission. Healthy Catholic life demands excellence, self-denial, love for the Church and her teachings, a disciplined focus on the needs of others, and an ongoing hunger for knowing and doing God's will. Our Newman Centers and campus ministries need to be, in effect, boot camps for this kind of vigorous Christianity.

There's another problem we need to mention too, with its roots not in the young adults who take part in our campus ministries but in those of us who are leaders in Church life. We can see it most clearly through the lens of a third and final example from Scripture.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus wants to feed an enormous crowd that's followed him. Philip is skeptical. He answers, "Two hundred days' wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little bit" (6:7). Andrew adds that "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish." But as soon as he says this, he dismisses it. "What good are these for so many?" (6:9).

Philip and Andrew sound sensible. They probably spoke for most of the Apostles. The boy's loaves and fish seem wildly out of proportion to the need. And of course, they are.

But Jesus accepts the boy's small offering and immediately transforms it to meet the need at hand. "Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks and distributed them" (6:11). The Lord honored and multiplied the boy's gift of food, no matter how meager, because it showed the kind of selflessness that God could use for great deeds.

Of course, Jesus had the power to work miracles. We need to rely on our wits and practical resources. But God can use us exactly as he used those loaves and fish; the same way he used Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Ignatius Loyola and Edith Stein — in unimaginable and abundant ways. God will multiply every gift we bring unselfishly to his service, no matter how meager our abilities. But we need to let God do his miracle by *letting go* of ourselves, our vanities, our plans and our assumptions.

Einstein once said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Too often in the Church we expect young adults to simply fill the empty slots of existing structures and ministries, even when some of the programs are obviously dead shells. Old methods of pastoral outreach predetermine the ways in which we employ new disciples. Then we're surprised that nothing seems to change.

We're often too quick to dismiss new initiatives and ideas because "It's not the way we do things here." It's "too liberal" or it's "too conservative." In my own experience as a bishop, I've been astonished at the number of campus ministers over the years who've rejected the obviously fruitful and very effective work of FOCUS — the Fellowship of Catholic University Students — for ideological reasons.

"Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says:

*'You shall indeed hear but not understand
you shall indeed look but never see.*

*Gross is the heart of this people,
they will hardly hear with their ears,
they have closed their eyes, lest they*

*see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart and be
converted, and I heal them.'*"

(Mt. 13:14-15)

I'm always a little uneasy in giving remarks like these today, because I wish I could offer some magic blueprint that would revivify campus ministry across the country and turn around our Church and culture in the next five years. I can't. I'm just not that smart. I wonder if anyone is.

But I do know that we don't need and can't afford maintainers of the *status quo*. I do know that we need visionaries; missionaries; leaders who will burn up every atom of themselves in the furnace of God's service, so that nothing remains but the light and warmth of Jesus Christ blazing out to touch the lives of others. We Catholics – you, me, all of us – need to *be* and to *make* a fire on the earth that consumes human hearts with God's love. We can't "teach" that. It doesn't come from books or programs. We need to embody it, witness it, *live it*.

I've come back again and again in recent weeks to those last words of Thomas More to his daughter Meg: "*You alone have long known the secrets of my heart.*" That kind of intimate knowledge comes only from love; a love that transforms the people who share it; a love that creates courage and hope; a love that shines down through the centuries into a room like this one today.

How can we *not* love a God who loves each one of us as a son or daughter with that kind of intimate love?

How can we *not* love a God who is the source and the meaning of love itself?

Our job is live what we preach, and to preach – by our words and by our actions – the good news of Jesus Christ to the young adults we serve. God loves us with the tenderness and zeal of a father. We need to reflect that same love to others. No one is immune to the power of being loved, least of all the young; and young adults deserve nothing less.