

Young Catholic America

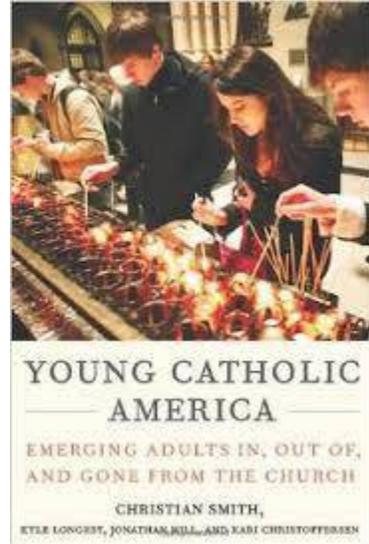
By Joe Tremblay, Adult Faith Coordinator

The Department of New Evangelization at the Diocese of Green Bay is the sponsor of this article

The Challenge:

Christian Smith's book, *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults, In, Out of and Gone From the Church* confirms what many parish-leaders in the Diocese of Green Bay have been concerned about in recent years: The difficulty adults are having in evangelizing youth and young adults. As one adult faith formation coordinator said, "About 15 years ago young adults used to drift away from the Church but then comeback when they had children. Today, however, they are not coming back."

Smith's research reveals that 62 percent of Catholic adolescents attend regular services during high school. But this percentage drops to 22 percent in the emerging adulthood years (ages 18-23). That is to say, the Catholic Church loses a significant number of young adults in the post-high school years.



In fact, Sherry Weddell, in her book, *Forming Intentional Disciples*, had this to say: "As the Pew report put it, Catholics have the biggest 'generation gap' of any religious community in the United States. Sixty-two percent of Catholics sixty-five and older in 2008 said that they attended Mass every week, while only 34 percent of Millennials did so." (pg. 44) The question then becomes, what can we do?

The Church's Answer:

In preparing for an adult faith formation program called, *On the Same Page*, I contacted a number of Catholic apostolates who have enjoyed some success in evangelizing youth: FOCUS, NET Ministries, Cardinal Newman Society, and Nashville Dominicans to name a few. I asked them what they believed high rates of faith retention rested on. The two principles they identified were

1. A personal relationship with Jesus Christ needed to be in place if religious education was to bear any fruit.
2. Parental support of that relationship is also of the greatest importance.

As for the first principle, *The General Directory for Catechesis* reads: "Only by starting with conversion, and therefore by making allowance for the interior disposition of 'whoever believes' can catechesis, strictly speaking, fulfill its proper task of education in the faith." (GDC, art. 62) Indeed, the way to the mind is through the heart. And conversion, according to the GDC, involves "essential moments" when the person experiences the person of Christ; moments when the heart is touched by grace.

Therefore, before religious education or catechesis can truly be effective, a relationship with Jesus Christ is essential. Only then will the Mass, the Sacraments and the Church take on greater relevance for our younger generation of Catholics. As such, an intensification of evangelization, witness talks, spiritual mentoring, retreats, and pilgrimages as a precursor to and basis for religious education and faith formation may be something that is worth taking a look at.

Lastly, the success of parishes and Catholic schools in evangelizing and educating youth also rests upon the active support of parents. The faith and religious participation of parents largely determine whether or not their children as emerging adults will retain the faith. To be sure, the Church was never meant to be a surrogate in forming the child; only a partner. It is only when parents take a leading role in evangelizing and educating their children can we, who work on behalf of the Church, hope to raise up a generation of disciples who are on their way.
