

## Understanding Young People (II)

Gavan Jennings

In the second part of this paper on pastoral work with young people the author continues to draw extensively on the writings of Pope John Paul II and Saint Josemaría. At the conclusion of his five main headings he outlines some practical steps which might be taken.

### 1. Understanding and affection

The first thing young people want to find in an adult, especially a pastor, is genuine affection. Pedro Casciaro describes how, as a youth, he was weak in his practice of the faith and strongly prejudiced against priests and religious, with something “almost like an allergy”. A friend of his encouraged him to meet Saint Josemaría; eventually he did so. This priest made him put aside all his reservations at a stroke:

Right from the start he infused into me both a great confidence and, at the same time, a respect for him far beyond what I owed simply to his years. I was particularly struck by his goodness, his infectious joy, his good humour... And I poured out my heart to him as I had never done to anybody else in my whole life.<sup>1</sup>

Pedro in turn brought his younger brother Jose María, then sixteen, to meet this priest. Again the effect was the same:

What was most unexpected was his affectionate behaviour, the way he inspired immediate trust, although we had never

1. Pedro Casciaro, *Dream and your dreams will fall short*, chap. 2.

met till that moment.<sup>2</sup>

2. Jose María Casciaro, *It is Worth While*, chap. 2. Saint Josemaría encouraged parents to live this same understanding with their own children, telling them to be patient, give good example, pray for their children and not mistreat them: “Don’t mistreat them. Why would you, when you are the person who must understand them more than anybody else?” (Madrid, October 29, 1972). Once, when asked by a parent about how to struggle against the tendency to criticise and lament over today’s youth, Saint Josemaría replied: “I see that you are looking for something positive; solutions instead of criticisms. Isn’t that so? We already know that young people have always been somewhat rebellious. In your day and mine, we got up to a lot as young people. Therefore, let’s not be surprised when the young are a little rebellious... Give them positive solutions. Don’t give out to them; listen to them, deal with them man to man, with affection, with understanding. Go half way, and you will see that you reach an understanding...” (Barcelona, November 22, 1972). On another occasion when asked by a father how to deal with an adolescent who retreats into himself, the reply of Saint Josemaría ran along the same line: “I think that you are right, but perhaps you are to blame a little also, because many times you present yourselves to your children as if you were impeccable. It is very good that the kids know that dad, when he was ten, twelve, fourteen or fifteen also did the odd stupid thing, but that then he went to his father – that child’s grandfather – and opening his heart he had his worries sorted out.” (Madrid, October 28, 1972).

The relationship between adults and the young is a two way process: Adults ought to engage in friendly discussion with young people so that both groups, overcoming the age barrier, can become better acquainted and can share the special benefits each generation has to offer the other.<sup>3</sup>

Affection does not mean being over-indulgent. In fact, young people often see over-indulgence as a mask for the selfishness of a parent or pastor who wants to court an easy popularity at the expense of the real good of the young person in question. It is affectionate guidance, not indulgence, that they seek:

They need guides, and they want them close at hand. If they turn to authority figures, they do so because they see in them a wealth of human warmth and a willingness to walk with them along the paths they are following.<sup>4</sup>

George Weigel asks why the Pope has such rapport with young people, even as a frail old man. One of the reasons he gives is the fact that he clearly does not pander to them:

Why did rapport with the young continue and even intensify? Several reasons suggested themselves. The Pope took young people seriously as persons, paying them the compliment of seeing them as people struggling with the meaning of life. When speaking with the young, he did not take the edge off a Christian message he clearly lived himself. Perhaps most importantly, he

did not pander to young people, challenging them to settle for nothing less than moral grandeur. At a time in Western history when virtually no other figure was calling young people to bear burdens and make sacrifices, John Paul II touched the youthful thirst for the heroic and related it to the human search for God.<sup>5</sup>

#### Practical steps

- Foment real friendship; do not be aloof or "stand on ceremony".
- Do not be afraid to say something which will hurt, though sweeten the pill.

#### 2. Authenticity

There is a danger that priests may feel they have to become something that they are not in order to attract young people to themselves. The figure of "Fr. Trendy" has received a justified lampooning. There are two possible failures here.

The first failure is the failure of the priest to be true to himself. He becomes contrived and this is something which is easily noticed, and is not admired by normal young people.

One of Karol Wojtyła's group of university students from Krakow – the Srodowisko group – who would go kayaking together, etc., said that while Fr. Karol would do menial tasks during these trips like everyone else, he still had them use the formal form of address, etc. The ex-student summed it up by saying: "Today, many priests try to be like the kids. We were trying to be like him."<sup>6</sup>

Saint Josemaría had the experience that young people embrace the Faith when they see that it is not something odd or

3. Vatican Council II, *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* 12.

4. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p.121.

5. George Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, p.494

6. *Ibid.*, p.105.

contrived; that it is, rather, authentic friendship with God:

I have seen with joy how Christian piety takes root in young people – those of today and those of forty years ago – when they have seen it being lived with sincerity; when they understand that prayer is face to face conversation with the Lord just as you speak to your father or friend; without anonymity. This comes about when you manage to have the words of Jesus Christ *vos autem dixi amicos* (Jn 15:15) (I have called you friends) echo in their souls, when their faith is given a strong call, when they see that the Lord is the same today, yesterday, and forever.<sup>7</sup>

The second failure in the priest who dissimulates is that he has forgotten that young people are not looking for him, but for Christ. And if they should seem to seek the pastor for himself he should turn this attention towards Christ. John Paul II sees this clearly:

... anywhere the Pope goes, he seeks out the young and the young seek him out. Actually, in truth, it is not the Pope who is being sought out at all. The one being sought out is Christ, who knows “that which is in every man” (cf. Jn 2:25), especially in a young person, and who can give true answers to his questions.<sup>8</sup>

#### Practical step

- Be yourself!

### 3. Help them to reflect on fundamental issues

It is necessary to have the conviction that young people are genuinely search-

ing for God. Without this one might be tempted to grow cynical in the face of the apparent unresponsiveness or disinterest of young people:

I would like to sum up by stressing that the young are searching for God, they are searching for the meaning of life, they are searching for definitive answers.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the first task facing a pastor working with young people is to help them to begin to reflect. They are swept along, as we have seen, in a “culture of fun”, of incessant entertainment, of instant gratification; all of which deadens the capacity to reflect. This is the contrary of being a contemplative in the middle of the world; it is to be immersed in the frenetic activity of the world without stopping to think, to reflect.<sup>10</sup> Young people must be helped to create the silence they need to examine their lives more profoundly.<sup>11</sup> To be drawn *towards* God young people need to be drawn *away* from submersion in their senses.<sup>12</sup> It is important to be convinced that while young people may not respond well initially to a clear presen-

9. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p 125.

10. “A break! You say you need to relax! ... opening your eyes wide so as to take in better the images of things, or almost closing them because you are short-sighted.

“Close them altogether! Have interior life, and you will see, in undreamt-of colour and relief, the wonders of a better world, of a new world:...” (Saint Josemaría, *The Way* 283).

11. “Silence is the door-keeper to the interior life” (Saint Josemaría, *The Way* 281).

12. “Ours is a time of continual movement which often leads to restlessness, with the risk of ‘doing for the sake of doing’. We must resist this temptation by trying ‘to be’ before trying ‘to do’.” (John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 15).

7. Saint Josemaría, *In Conversation with Mgr Josemaría Escrivá* 102.

8. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, pp.123-124.

tation of the Church's teaching, as long as the seed is sown it is in their souls ready to germinate, perhaps months, even years later.<sup>13</sup> Within this context it is particularly important to help youngsters know and treasure the great spiritual and intellectual tradition of the Church. As John Paul II puts it in his latest *World Youth Day Message*:

Discover your Christian roots, learn about the Church's history, deepen your knowledge of the spiritual heritage which has been passed onto you, follow in the footsteps of the witnesses and teachers who have gone before you!<sup>14</sup>

#### Practical steps

- Avoid a voluntaristic approach; e.g. "You simply must go to Mass!" (older generations have grown up with a sense of duty combined with a sense of the faith, both of which are now absent).
- Foster the reading of good literature, particularly the classics which present the human situation, e.g. Dostoevsky, Solzhenitzen, C. S. Lewis, Tolkein, Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Eugenio Corti's *The Red Horse*.
- Initiate a deeper discussion of issues.
- Introduce them to philosophy, as giving the rational foundation for the Faith.

13. Cardinal Edouard Gagnon described a conversation he had with John Paul II. "He told me that truth has a grace attached to it. Anytime we speak the truth... there is an internal grace of God which accompanies that truth. The truth may not immediately enter the mind and heart of those to whom we talk, but the grace of God is there and at the time they need it, God will open their heart and they will accept it" (*Position Paper 329*).

14. *Message of the Holy Father to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the XVII World Youth Day, #2*.

\*Pray for the "gift of tongues" (so needed for getting across Church teaching; highlighting its attractiveness).

#### 4. Human virtues

Human virtues form the base of supernatural life; without them nothing else can be achieved. Young people must be helped grow in generosity, constancy and fortitude. At the same time they must be helped to fight individualism, and to overcome excessively sentimental attitudes. This requires deep doctrinal formation. Formation in temperance is especially important to protect them against the lure of consumerism. Softness, moodiness, impressionability decline when a young people learns to work hard, pray work and live soberly.

Vatican Council II recognized the importance of helping young people a discerning spirit towards the mass media.<sup>15</sup> This has become much more important with the advent of the Internet and cable TV. They should be critical and discerning of what they see, hear and read; educators should help them in this regard; parents should shield them from what is harmful to good morals. The formation of young people in moderation and self-control in the use of the instruments of mass media is vital.

In spiritual guidance young people must be given the supernatural means, particularly the sacrament of confession, to help them win in the ascetical struggle, but always respecting individual freedom:

15. See Vatican Council II, *Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication 11*.

In giving spiritual guidance we must avoid producing creatures who lack their own capacity to judge, and who only ever materially carry out what they've been told. Spiritual guidance must, rather, form people with the capacity to judge situations. And this capacity requires maturity, strength of conviction, sufficient knowledge of Church teaching, refinement of spirit and formation of the will.<sup>16</sup>

#### Practical steps

- Present the attractiveness of strong characters; e.g. stories of the 'heroes' old and new. Within the history of the Church there are many young saints whose lives are real source of inspiration for the young.<sup>17</sup>
- Establish practical courses in human virtues; e.g. Stephen Covey's *7 Habits for Highly Effective People* and *7 Habits for Highly Effective Teens*, and David Isaacs' *Character Building, a guide for parents and teachers*.

16. Saint Josemaría, *In Conversations with Myr Josemaría Escrivá*, 93. "I have always seen my work as a priest and shepherd of souls as being aimed at helping each person face up to all the demands of his life and to discover what God wants from him in particular – without in any way limiting that holy independence and blessed personal responsibility which are the features of a Christian conscience" (Saint Josemaría, *Christ is passing by* 99).

17. "How many saints, especially young saints, can we count in the Church's history! In their love for God the heroic virtues shone before the world, and so they became models of life which the Church has held up for imitation by all. Let us remember only a few of them: Agnes of Rome, Andrew of Phu Yen, Pedro Calungsod, Josephine Bakhita, Thérèse of Lisieux, Pier Giorgio Frassati, Marcel Callo, Francisco Castelló Aleu or again Kateri Tekakwitha, the young Iroquois called 'the Lily of the Mohawks' (*Message of the Holy Father to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the XVII World Youth Day, #2*).

- Organize character-building activities: hikes, camping expeditions, team sports and projects.
- Develop voluntary work programs.

#### 5. Virtue of chastity

Young people, especially in their own families, need to be trained in chastity.<sup>18</sup> They need to be shown how chastity is not something negative – a repression – but a "joyful affirmation". The priest must not be blind to the "savage work of those who think that man is a beast."<sup>19</sup> Young people are subject to a relentless barrage of impurity in the mass media. Here the corruption of young girls is very evident. When presenting to young Irish people the teaching of the Church on sexual morality one has to be aware that what one is asking them to believe runs counter to perhaps everything they have heard up to that point. Many parents, teachers, media, friends, politicians, figures from the entertainment world constantly portray, implicitly or explicitly, a 'counter-Gospel'. For them, there is no question of pre-marital sex, contraception, etc. being graverly sinful. Their attitude is: "the whole world knows, that they are perfectly acceptable." Certainly the fact that "the Church teaches they are sinful", is not much of an argument for youngsters, and clearly not strong enough to enable them to turn their backs on the overwhelming majority of voices they are hearing. It takes a very big leap to stop and say to oneself: "All of my friends,

18. See Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 49.

19. Saint Josemaría, *The Way* 12.

all of my idols, my parents and I myself up till now, have got it totally wrong!"

At times a young person can despair of ever acquiring the virtue of holy purity; he or she must be introduced to the means: Penance, the Eucharist, a life of prayer, spiritual direction, devotion to the Blessed Virgin, mortification, work, flight from the occasions. Obviously a training here is a necessary preparation to be able to embrace the gift of celibacy.

#### Practical steps

- Deepen their understanding of the arguments in favour of chastity (e.g. using ideas from the Pope's *Theology of the Body* discourses, and his *Love and Responsibility*).
- Give an attractive presentation of the Church's teaching on the virtue of chastity: using e.g. Mary Beth Bonacci's *True Love*, and associated videos.
- Be patient and encouraging.

#### 6. Present the love of God clearly

A fundamental factor to be remembered in work with young people is that they need to have the love of Christ revealed to them. If there is a crisis among our youth, its epicentre lies in the fact that they have not discovered the love of Christ and are desperately seeking for it in the other things the world offers them, and when they do not find it there they fall into despair or cynicism.

The Pope repeatedly comes back to the theme of the love of God in his addresses to young people.<sup>20</sup> In the very

20. For example: "The Father loves you always and for ever: this is the unheard-of novelty, 'the very simple yet profound proclamation owed to

first of his messages for the World Youth Days, John Paul II chose as the keynote passage from Sacred Scripture the line from St. John: "We have recognized and believed in the love that God has for us".<sup>21</sup> The first quote that he uses is taken from his first encyclical:

Man cannot live without love. He remains incomprehensible to himself; his life is deprived of meaning, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate deeply in love.<sup>22</sup>

He continues to challenge the young to respond to God's love for them, and not to settle for anything less:

Dear young people, do not be content with anything less than the highest ideals! Do not let yourselves be dispirited by those who are disillusioned with life and have grown deaf to the deepest and most authentic desires of the heart. You are right to be disappointed with hollow entertainment and passing fads, and with aiming at too little in life. If you have an ardent desire for the Lord you will steer clear of the mediocrity and conformism so widespread in our society.<sup>23</sup>

#### Practical steps

- Present the figure of Christ through scripturally based meditations.

20. (cont.) humanity by the Church' (cf. *Christi-fideles Laici* 34). If the Son had given us only this word, it would be enough. 'See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are' (1 Jn 3:1). We are not orphans, love is possible. Because – as you know – we are not capable of loving if we are not loved" (*Message for World Youth Day, 1999, #3*).

21. 1 Jn 4:16.

22. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* 10.

23. *Message for the XVII World Youth Day, #2*.

- Encourage devotion to the Blessed Sacrament through regular adoration before the tabernacle, and/or through exposition of Blessed Sacrament.
- Stress our divine filiation (cf. CCC 460); that our faith is eminently positive and based on love not precept.

### 6. Conclusion

In summary, we could say that there is a crisis among young people; that they are subject to corrupting influences like never before. But in the face of that we cannot fall into sterile lamentation. Both John Paul II and Saint Josemaría give us a wonderful example of a positive outlook on youth, despite all the negative factors. In both, the basis of their optimism is an underlying conviction that youth is a most special time in the life of a human being. For this reason the stakes are very high, and it is obvious that the battle will be hard.

Another factor for the optimism of both is their fundamentally positive view of human nature: that man is made for truth. If young people are presented with the truth of the Gospel, in an authentic manner, they will respond.

Yet again, the young have shown themselves to be, for Rome and for the Church, a special gift of the Spirit of God. Sometimes when we look at the young, with the problems and weaknesses that characterize them in contemporary society, we tend to be pessimistic. The *Jubilee of Young People* however changed that, telling us that young people, whatever their possible ambiguities, have a profound longing for those genuine values which find their fullness in Christ. Is not Christ the secret of true freedom and profound joy of heart? Is not Christ the supreme friend and the teacher of all genuine friendship? If Christ is presented to young people as he really is, they experience him as an answer that is convincing and they can accept his message, even when it is demanding and bears the mark of the Cross. For this reason, in response to their enthusiasm, I did not hesitate to ask them to make a radical choice of faith and life and present them with a stupendous task: to become "morning watchmen" (cf. Is 21:11-12) at the dawn of the new millennium.<sup>21</sup>

*Rev Gavan Jennings is a priest of the Opus Dei Prelature. He lives and works in Dublin.*