

“Children and Youth”
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Delivered at the Lake Dallas Mission Retreat | 2022

Youth Ministry and the Remnant

In helping to evaluate and develop youth ministry at my previous church, All Saints Charlottesville, and my current one, St. Alban’s Oviedo, I realized very quickly that without a vibrant community of faithful adults, youth ministry will stall. That’s because ministry to youth and children is primarily about helping young people find their vocation in Christ’s Church, instantiated locally in the parish. If your parish is anemic, there is nothing to invite them into. So, for the same reason you need a remnant to pursue mission, you need a remnant to minister to youth.

The remnant is increasingly critical, given the changing nature of adolescence in contemporary America. By definition, adolescents are “in process” or “becoming” in a way that is not true of adults. As the saying goes, “Adolescence begins in biology [with puberty] and ends in culture” — when the adolescent is vocationally established with financial independence; familially established in marriage or vowed celibacy; and religiously established in a church community. Lacking these things — marriage, career, a settled faith community — an adolescent is no longer a child but not yet an adult. An adolescent, you might say, has been thrust out of childhood by puberty and is in the process of casting about the culture in search of a coherent adult to become.

Two-hundred years ago “adolescence” was a relatively short period. For reasons we do not fully understand, puberty has been occurring at younger and younger ages over the past two centuries. Meanwhile, the achievement of settled adulthood has been pushed dramatically later. What was once a two-year flash-in-a-pan now lasts fifteen or even twenty years.

For this reason, among others, “youth culture” — a distinctive post-childhood, pre-adulthood cultural milieu — emerged in the early 20th century. And over the course of the last century, the mediating institutions that once worked together to settle youth firmly into adulthood gradually eroded and have by now pretty well collapsed. Adolescents have been systematically abandoned. Consider the family. The dramatic rise in divorce over the past fifty years; the crisis of parental confidence and competence in recent decades (thanks, paradoxically enough, to the proliferation of parenting theories in books and on the Internet); the increasing phenomenon of distracted parenting in the past decade (i.e. “half parent, half smartphone”) — all of these have left adolescents without a strong mooring at home. Meanwhile, our school systems have increasingly become nothing more than factories producing standardized test scores. Youth sports, depicted as sites of physical and character development, are often oriented towards vicarious *adult* fulfillment at the expense of youth. Technical excellence has skyrocketed, while genuine character formation has all but vanished. Today’s coaches are often overgrown adolescents who cannot form youth because *they* are not well-formed. Even churches have been complicit — creating siloed youth groups that actively prevent youth from being incorporated and inculturated into the adult congregation.

Lastly, Veteran educators frequently comment on the disappearance of “unstructured time” in middle and upper class families due to sports, excessively demanding academics, and absurd amounts of extracurricular activities. What unstructured time remains is increasingly disembodied. Our children experience “reality” through the

artificial mediation of screens. Whereas, in generations past, youth would have been outdoors amidst a local environment, today's youth increasingly spend free time in climate-controlled "built environments," physically immobile, taking in a virtual world through video games, social media, and streaming platforms. These are all fairly standard observations in the youth ministry literature — but I do think most Christians grossly underestimate just how devastating this fundamental detachment from reality is.

To sum up, we as a culture no longer offer our adolescents anything resembling a coherent vision of adulthood, and the upshot is that American youth have become increasingly unmoored and unstable. Adolescents have become shape-shifting chameleons in adult spaces. This is not in itself a new phenomenon — there's a reason we call sycophantic frauds "Eddie Haskells." But what the work of sociologist Chap Clark and others implies is that today's Eddie Haskells are not necessarily simple hypocrites hiding a "true self" beneath a false mask. Rather, there is no true self to hide. Youth are simply unable to bring their various "selves" into a coherent whole. Their personal failures to integrate are the consequence and symptom of our dis-integrated culture.

Thus, depressingly, even apparently strong and growing faith among youth may turn out to be illusory. Christian ministry cannot be satisfied with cultivating the church "mask." We must, somehow, seek to bring the many selves of today's youth into a coherent whole grounded in Christ's Body, the Church. And, in some sense, we have to do it alone, because the rest of the culture is not going to help.

The Parish at the Center

This is all very grim news, and it is certainly terrible for our culture. But let me suggest that this can be good for the Church — because it requires us to be who we are. The parish is always the heart of Christian life — and now this reality is more unavoidable. The parish cannot be a mere supplement to a well-balanced life. You cannot bring children to church on Sunday and expect the public school, the athletic team, and the Boy Scouts to help raise them Monday through Saturday, if indeed you ever could have.

This means the parish must take more ownership for the formation and education of her children. Fr. Hayden and Rachael will offer ways they are seeing this happen in their context, but let me just mention my two hobby-horses: first, the need to take greater ownership in schooling and, second, the need to consider your "young adult" adolescents.

Your most dedicated families might be at church five hours a week. Children in formal schools generally spend 35-40 hours in school each week. How and where are the children of the parish being educated? How can you aid parents in assessing, choosing, and accessing schooling? Perhaps that means scholarship funds or connecting with a local Christian or classical charter school. How can you support or expand schooling options in your area? How can the parish support families that choose to homeschool?

In our diocese, some parishes started by hosting classical homeschooling co-ops that eventually became formal parochial schools (for instance, All Saints Mills River launching next fall and Lindisfarne Hall Fernandina Beach, now in its sixth year as a formal school. St. Pauls Melbourne, in its second year, started as a parochial school. Here at St. Alban's Oviedo, we have a unique partnership with the Ecclesial Schools Initiative that makes classical Christian education truly accessible for any family. Check out esischools.org for more on that. The forthcoming project I am most excited about is [St. Dunstan's Academy](#), an Anglican boarding school for

high school boys dedicated to a Benedictine model of work, prayer, and study — classical education, a working educational farm, real training in skilled trades, all structured around the Mass and the Daily Office. The founding headmaster, my friend Thomas Fickley, is here — if you haven't already, do talk to him!

I do want to caution against trying to do too much. A parish is a parish and not a school. At the least, though, you should be considering how you can aid parents in assessing, choosing, and accessing schooling.

Much more briefly, my second hobby-horse: How are you serving the “young adults” in your parish? As one of ours told me, “College students seem like they have a lot of fun — and we do! — but for many of us it's also the loneliest period of our lives, because it's the first time we've been removed from our families.” Though legal adults, the vast majority of this cohort are sociological adolescents, and the period from age 18 to age 30 may be even more critical for faith retention than high school. How can your parish welcome and serve them?

To return to where I started, you can't do any of this well if your parish is not forming a community of spiritually mature, emotionally healthy, well-formed adults — because, without that, you have nothing to offer children and youth. Academic research on faith retention reinforces this insight. While the strongest predictor of faith outcomes for children is the strength of their parents' faith, parental impact is not always direct. It is also mediated through community. Beginning in high school, youth begin to adapt more to *peers* than to *parents*. Likewise, those who have strong adult mentors in the faith *in addition to* their parents tend to thrive in the long term. But, of course, parents play a major role in determining their children's broader community of peers and adult Christians. So if you want faithful children, develop a faithful remnant.

I am *not* saying you should wait until you have a remnant to minister to youth, because remnant formation and youth formation go hand-in-hand. If adults really consider the kinds of people they want parish children to grow into, then they will naturally recognize that *they* must be those kinds of people. And as they work towards spiritual maturity, they will naturally turn outward in mission. The Church offers up her life for the sake of the world, and she begins with the first field of evangelism — which is the children of the parish.