

How do Lasallians Address the Religious Needs of Youth?

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Tuesday, August 29, 2006

The following paper is written in response to a two-part question: “What do you perceive are the needs of young people today and how might we best respond to those needs through our Lasallian tradition?”

### The Needs of Teens

#### *The Study: Soul Searching*

Like any of us coming to this seminar, I have my own opinions about the needs of youth and will briefly offer my findings at the very end of this paper. However, a large portion of my comments are stimulated by the important work from Christian Smith and Melinda Denton found in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. They have published results of an important study on the spiritual and religious lives of American teenagers.

The study divided the youth of America into 7 different religious groups: Main line Protestant, Conservative Protestant, Black Protestant, Mormon, Catholic, Jewish and non-religious teens. The study interviewed 267 teens and surveyed 3,290 teens.

The authors saw fit to write an entire chapter on their Catholic results. I suggest that the two reasons for writing this chapter is because of the large number of Catholic youth in the U.S. (25%) and because of the low scores of Catholic youth compared to the other religious faiths. This paper will first report on some of the findings for youth in general and then move to Catholic youth in particular. (It would be worthwhile to refine that study even further by researching how youth in Lasallian schools might differ from Catholic schools in general.)

The study concludes with eleven broad conclusions gleaned from the research.<sup>1</sup> Rather than list all eleven, I will choose those that I believe to be most important for our purposes, namely, how can we as Lasallians address the needs of teens today.

(Conclusions 2 & 6) “the character of teenage religiosity in the United States is extraordinarily conventional...Most are quite content to follow in their parents’ footsteps.” At first blush, this looks like good news. The bad news is that most Catholic parents no longer “actively practice” Catholicism.<sup>2</sup> To push the envelope further, “the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents.”

First of all, we do not have to worry about teens going off on wild and crazy tangents concerning spirituality or religion. Nevertheless, for too many, this worry is an active one. For example, I was in Memphis, TN when young boys were murdered by a few older boys in a Satanic Cult. Before too long, magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* were writing about the occurrence of Satanic Cults in the U.S. Regardless of the media or other projections, this study found that interest in “eclectic Spiritual seeking” was extremely low. But interest in cults sells news.

Second, the point about parents as the prime influence on the spiritual lives of adolescents was made frequently in this study. This also means that when parents do

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, (New York, N.Y., 2005) pp.260-264.

<sup>2</sup> Ordinarily, when the term “practicing Catholic” is used it means a Catholic who attends Mass on Sundays. On certain Sundays of the year, a count is taken and sent in to determine how many Catholics are active in parishes. I have never been sold on this definition of “practicing Catholic.” Surely more than attendance at Mass is necessary for calling oneself a Catholic. The problem is measurements. It is much easier to count the number of heads at Mass than it is to measure: private prayer and morality, a love and practice of justice, being a compassionate, loving person and a level of right relationships both with individuals and community.

NOT encourage religion or spirituality, the negligence has an impact as well. The research went on to say that separating youth from their parents for services or religious instruction on a regular basis serves neither the adolescent nor the religion very well.

(Conclusion 7) “The greater the supply of religiously grounded relationships, activities, programs, opportunities, and challenges available to teenagers, other things being equal, the more likely teenagers will be religiously engaged and invested.”<sup>3</sup> In the study’s chapter “On Catholic Teens” the study tries to identify why the scores for being religiously or spiritually invested are so low for Catholic teens. There are two basic conclusions. “Simply put, the U.S. Catholic Church appears in its institutional infrastructure to invest fewer resources into youth ministry and education than do many other Christian traditions and denominations in the United States.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, cautions of the so called Catholic scandal still loom. What kind of relationships and activities are allowed or sanctioned or smart in the present milieu?

Still other results revert again back to parents: “U.S. Catholic parents of teenagers are noticeably less likely than other Christian parents to say that their church has been very or extremely supportive and helpful to them as parents in trying to raise their teens, and are more likely to say that their church has been somewhat or a little supportive of them as parents of teens.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, is it possible that parents do not attend a church that they do not recognize as supporting them as parents?

Conclusion 8: “Most U.S. teens have a difficult to impossible time explaining what they believe...And others express beliefs that are, from the official perspectives of their own religious traditions at least, positively erroneous...Our distinct impression is

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, p. 261.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, p. 210.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, p. 211.

that very many religious congregations and communities of faith in the U.S. are failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating their youth.” I will leave this conclusion as self-explanatory.

Conclusion 9: “It seems that when the engagement and education of youth by their religious communities is weak, then the faith of teenagers in those traditions tends to degenerate into Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” There is a lengthy description and listing about what entails MTD. Basically, I’ll describe it as: A nice God created a nice world. If we are nice now, when we die we will go to heaven which is really nice.

Conclusion 11: “Highly religious teenagers appear to be doing much better in life than less religious teenagers.” Religious teens scored better than non-religious teens when measuring “risk behaviors, quality of family and adult relationships, moral reasoning and behavior, community participation, media consumption, sexual activity and emotional well-being.”<sup>6</sup>

### Essentials Describing God

The attributes of God are many, of course. Yet, I believe that we Lasallians need to give two sides of the spectrum of God to those we teach. These descriptors for God are made independent of the previous section which lists the spiritual and religious needs of teens.

First, God is transcendent and never able to be completely described, possessed or understood by us. No matter how close we come to our awareness of God, we can never fully know God. We have more faith in God than knowledge of God. Perhaps this is what is meant in the Old Testament when it was thought that anyone who would look upon the face of God would die. In this life, we can not see God! In one of her latest

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, pp. 218-219.

books about the beginnings of religions, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of our Religious Traditions*, Karen Armstrong illustrates how the earliest of religions made a huge leap in belief when it recognized the transcendence of God. Paradoxically, an accurate description of God must include mystery. When mystery of God is eliminated, so is the accuracy of our definition of God.

Second, God is immanent. If God is Creator, Father, artist, and maker, then God is in all that God creates. More, God is in relationship to all else. A distinction probably needs to be made here. I am not advocating *pantheism* whereby creation is actually the Creator but rather *panENtheism* whereby nothing created is absent of the Creator.

So, while God is over, above and beyond us, God is also in, of and a part of us, simultaneously.

I add this brief section on God because of the reality here in the U.S. and our resultant task. Namely, teens seem to be inarticulate about their faith. At the same time, the American Bishops desire “conformity of the word” or a literacy in being able to articulate the faith. That desire for literacy can not be substituted with a memorized, agreed upon formula which neatly packages God. The formula will surely be short lived and inadequate on the one hand while it lacks the benefit of true relationship on the other. Any articulation we teach about God must include both transcendence and immanence. I believe that in the current fundamentalist move by most U.S. churches, we as Lasallians must speak to these two essentials in our human attempts at coming close to describing God and faith.

## Lasallian Characteristics

How do we as Lasallians give what's best in our tradition to the youth of the U.S. given their needs?

The U.S. Toronto Region has articulated five characteristics of Lasallian schools. I see these five characteristics as the main avenues of tending to the needs of our students.

Although there is not a lock-step order of the goals, there is one goal that is recognized as the most important of the five goals. As Lasallians 1) *We instill Gospel Values*. Keeping in step with the wider Catholic Church in general, we find it absolutely necessary to recognize the values taught and lived by Jesus Christ. These values are not reduced to anecdotal one-liners in the scriptures. Rather, values are themes that are used over and over again throughout the four Gospels.<sup>7</sup>

As Lasallians we 2) *exercise a special option toward the poor*. De La Salle's life was changed by the poor. The Brothers were called together in response to ignorance and poverty of the youth in the streets of France. As far as we are able, each of our institutions informs, instructs and empowers our members to meet, know, love and help the poor. As Lasallians we open ourselves to be met, known, loved and helped by the poor. We need them as much as they need us.

Ronald Rohlheiser states that "800 years before Christ, virtually all the Jewish prophets begin to affirm...one singular truth." "The quality of our faith depends upon the

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<sup>7</sup> It would be a worthwhile study to take an actual count listing values that keep showing up over and over again in the life of Jesus. For example, how many times in all four Gospels does Jesus get angry or use violence? How often are we told to love one another, even our enemies? How often does Jesus speak about divorce? How often does Jesus speak about our tendency to hate? Are Jesus' words more prohibitive against pride and arrogance or against sexual sins? How have we as a Church taken a stance on these values? What do we consider morality?

character of justice in the land and the character of justice is to be measured by how we treat three groups—widows, orphans, and foreigners (those with the least status in society).<sup>8</sup>

One out of every 10 lines in the New Testament are a reference to Jesus dedication and concern for the poor. In the Gospel of Luke it's one of every 8 lines and in the epistle of James it's every six lines. Whether we are in direct service to the poor or if we teach a generation about the poor, we are dedicated to building a relationship with those who were most favored by Jesus.

As Lasallians we 3) *Create and sustain respectful human relationships in community.* We recognize that it is not up to us to decide which empires or countries or religions are evil and which are favored. We recognize, instead, God as the Father of all; therefore, all persons are our Brothers and Sisters through creation. Lasallians have a love of God, country and the Church while always recognizing that we are never better than others. Each person we encounter is someone worthy of our time, attention, love and respect. There is always more than one right way to think. Truth is so big and so important, that it seems God gives a piece of the truth to each of us. The only way we have half a chance at coming to the whole truth is through uniting in community and sharing perceptions of the truth while listening to one another. On our own, we are left with only pieces of the truth.

As Lasallians 4) *We develop and maintain diverse programs meeting recognized standards of excellence.* Following in the footsteps of our founder, Lasallians move beyond their own comfort zones finding ways to best serve those they teach. De la Salle not only gathered together Brothers that he considered “lower than my

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald Rohlheiser, *The Holy Longing*, p. 175.

valet” he also went against an entire educational system and taught students in their own language rather in the classical Greek and Latin. As Lasallians, we do not propose a lock step form of education for all populations anymore than we have a one-size-fits-all program for running Lasallian Youth.

Finally and familiarly, as Lasallians 5) *We are animated by and foster a spirit of faith and zeal.* Maybe more than ever, being Lasallian is being recognized for the zeal, or perhaps, the passion for what we do. We are fed by the very energy it takes to be most Lasallian. Our work, our life is more of an opportunity and an answer to a call than a necessary evil. And, we recognize that the work we do is a share in God’s work. The task is never just ours alone. Because of our faith in God, and in one another, we recognize that more is possible than if we had to rely on our own gifts and talents alone.

The combination of these five characteristics is our Lasallian composite. I propose that these five attributes are not just characteristic of our ministries but also characteristic of our mission. We can best serve our youth through these five characteristics.

### Personal Gleanings

In a recent St. Mary’s catalogue I found a compelling question on the cover. It read: “What is the deepest longing of young people? (read more on page 34).” Immediately I went to page 34. The author, Jerry Goebel, states that teens need our “uninterrupted attention.” I agree with the author. In fact, I would broaden the statement. I believe that all of us need one another’s attention. Every encounter is an opportunity to either ignore or affirm one another. Each of those actions will be noticed and remembered by the recipient of the negation or affirmation.

In assessing the needs of teens, I believe that this author's observations are accurate and important. That being said, I would like to add two of my own observations from all of my readings in the last two years. Whether reading the newspaper or the bible, novels or spiritual reading, educational guru's or histories of religion, two general principles for becoming whole human beings seem to emerge for me.

They are: 1) an acute awareness of the primacy of relationship and 2) a radical openness to on-going transformation.

Both the list of conclusions from *Soul Searching* as well as the five Lasallian Characteristics, attest to the importance of relationship. *Soul Searching* reports that parents' influence upon their teens' religious formation is unrivaled. Secondly, the greater the supply of religiously grounded relationships, the more a teen will be invested and engaged with religion. The specific Lasallian Characteristic which corresponds to the importance of relationship is # 3) *Create and sustain respectful human relationships in community*. Nothing replaces relationship. Even the author from the St. Mary's catalogue focuses in on teens' need for our attention and time. We extract from the book of Genesis that all of God's creation is inter-connected. When we separate, isolate and cut off we may as well be describing punishment, war or disease. Lack of relationship, it seems to me, is the root of all problems.

"A radical openness to on-going transformation" is not always as obvious a conclusion as relationship. But let us go to Genesis for a number of stories of willingness toward transformation. First and foremost we have a God who transforms the void and creates. God transforms nothing into something and then sees that "it is very good."

Next, we have our original parents with a kind of negative willingness to transform toward something different by eating from the tree of knowledge. Then, Abraham, the patriarch of the three great religions, answers a call toward transformation as a whole new way of understanding a God: a God of relationship! Of course, the entire life of this tribesman is changed forever. Abraham is a powerful example of the Lasallian characteristic that indicates an opening to transformation: 5) *We are animated by and foster a spirit of faith and zeal*. Faith in God's providence was a hallmark of St. John Baptist De La Salle. In fact, he had passion and zeal for this kind of deep faith in God.

I like to define old age as: learned enough for now. When I no longer have the energy to remain open to God's transforming call, I have become old. When I can no longer be surprised, when I am impervious to awe and wonder, I am old. At times, old age can hit someone in their twenties. It is our task to keep our students young, vibrant and open. We investigate their needs, put those needs up against how we have experienced God, and do our best to journey with them toward wholeness. As Lasallians we have a unique contribution to offer the young and the young at heart. As educators we are involved not only in the present but also in the future. As educators we are invested with the building blocks of wholeness: recognizing the power of right relationships and remaining open to God's transformation.