

Who Am I? Why Am I Here?

Revisiting *Renewing the Vision* and Contemporary Challenges of Catholic Adolescents – with Some Possible Solutions

Thomas Malewitz

Through *Renewing the Vision* (1997), the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops offered a comprehensive framework to help guide and allow adolescents to mature physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually through ministry experiences. This document offered opportunities for adolescents to use their talents, be creative and learn the leadership skills essential to establishing the foundation for full, active and conscious participation in the church.

Our bishops challenged all the faithful to not jump to conclusions about adolescents, but to listen in earnest to their stories, let them offer their talents in a truly loving environment and continue to dialogue with them on their path of self-discovery as they ultimately find their meaning and purpose in Christ Jesus. As principals, educators, youth ministers and parents of adolescents, how can we be more faithful to

the spirit of *Renewing the Vision* in a technologically saturated culture?

The Spin

As a high school theology teacher, I am always searching for video clips that will be a catalyst for my students. I am fascinated by the Internet and the opportunity to find video clips of historical events, speeches and various media memorabilia. Some of the historical clips I viewed recently revolve around the 1992 presidential debates. I cannot explain how or why this period has peaked my interest. It may be nostalgia, but after watching several clips I became captivated by the role of the third-party candidate, Ross Perot. His presence (positive or negative) brought a different dynamic to the race.

That dynamic was probably most visible in the vice presidential debate involving Al Gore, Dan Quayle and Admiral James Stockdale, Perot's running mate. Stockdale began his opening

remarks philosophically, hoping to explain his past, talents and why he was included in the debate. Unfortunately, his choice of introduction—"Who am I? Why am I here?"—soon became a political punch line that completely overshadowed his illustrious Navy career. The media spin that followed the debate haunted Stockdale. Video clips satirizing Stockdale and Perot by "Saturday Night Live" comedians Phil Hartman and Dana Carvey still get thousands of YouTube hits each year, long after the election and the deaths of Hartman and Stockdale.

Adolescent Confusion and Rapid Change in Environment

Since that time, a generation of youth has been born and matured to adolescence. They live in an atmosphere of constant change and spin tactics that echo Stockdale's media



experiences. Many adolescents feel anxious about how one misunderstood comment can lead to peer ridicule, labeling and bullying. In a time that should be full of self-discovery, challenge, creativity and introspection, contemporary adolescents often play the role of passive conformers and lack vision for their future (Sax, 2007). “Who am I? Why am I here?” ought to be the very questions adolescents address. But instead of honestly searching for answers, many youth settle for acceptance rather than ostracism by peer groups, media trends and cultural expectations.

American culture has changed significantly over the past two decades, especially expectations and trends for youth. The technological boom has changed communication, commerce, literacy, careers, education and entertainment. In 1993, the Internet supplied roughly 1 percent of all information used for telecommunications purposes; 15 years later, about 97 percent of telecommunicated information was carried through the Internet (Hilbert, 2011).

The standard form of communication between adolescents has migrated from telephone calls to text messaging. The Internet has evolved social networking among friends, family and strangers through sites like MySpace, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Many adolescents now judge their popularity on the number of online “friends,” “likes” and comments they receive from a particular post. Sax (2007, 2010) indicates that trends that define popularity are developing narcissistic tendencies in this generation of youth, encouraging a lack of engagement in real life and fostering addictive tendencies to virtual reality.

The Call for Engagement and Self-Discovery

Throughout adolescence, young adults need opportunities to develop their talents, gain trust in their abilities

and mature in the decision-making skills that will enable them to develop leadership roles in society. Many traditional expectations in education and the workforce have changed, forcing young adults to reexamine their role in society. With the dwindling use of coming-of-age rituals in our culture, the distinction between childhood and adulthood has been blurred. Sax (2007) indicates that with the disappearance or redefinition of traditional societal roles for men and women, responsibilities for adolescence have become vague, leaving many, especially young males, without a vision. Without clear expectations and life goals, many adolescents have become unmotivated, underutilizing their talents and existing without a defined role in society or the church.

As educators, we know that self-discovery is an essential search throughout adolescence. Through learning about personal preferences, individuals come to know who they are and their purpose with much more clarity. As a student matures, Giussani (2001) indicates that the education process ought to evolve beyond a child receiving a lecture into a dialogue between teacher and student.

Possible Solutions

This dialogue allows adolescents to develop decision-making skills through crisis and criticism and develop respect for their gifts and life goals by listening to others and contributing to their community. This is a community at heart. To grow and thrive, adolescents must engage, receive and be aware of others’ and their own needs. This type

of community demands compromise through charity.

Giussani (2001) states that the process of education needs to define *who we are* and *what we need*. Adolescents need an environment in which they learn responsibility and that actions affect others. In the midst of the biological, emotional and spiritual changes taking place in their lives, adolescents search for acceptance and balance in the world around them. It is no accident that in popular TV shows such as “Pretty Little Liars” and “Glee,” adolescents are characterized as longing for intimacy and passion within a group of friends and breaking all moral convictions to impress and be acknowledged (Stuart, 2011; Wiseman, 2009). Many adolescents find this sense of community through athletic teams, learning how to live in community through the example of a coach and interaction with teammates. Our culture focuses a lot on the physical development of adolescents, but offers little for their emotional and spiritual needs. Many secondary schools are pushed by legislation to teach healthier eating habits, encourage more exercise and promote involvement in sports, but does that really help our youth to be healthier in mind and spirit?

Through the Holy Spirit, the church can fill an individual’s heart with all of the gifts adolescents are searching for by offering opportunities for physical, emotional and spiritual growth through ministry. Fruitful youth ministry and religious educational programs need to help youth enhance their gifts physically, emotionally and spiritually. Ministry-based community service projects can be an important avenue for developing

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leadership skills that extend beyond the parish into the larger community. Even these life-changing mountaintop experiences can become lacking if the experience is not grounded in the larger context of faith and tradition.

A revitalized and engaging theology education needs to illustrate that adolescents are not a separate group in the church, but part of the ancient divine story living now. Employing resources such as film clips and music videos to frame subject matter for students can result in better comprehension and application assessment scores than lectures and textbook readings. Last year in my course, I implemented this technique in a discussion on the journey and discipleship narrative of the Gospel of Mark by using Peter Jackson's "Fellowship of the Ring" (2001) and the prequel "The Hobbit" (2012) as a modern multimedia context for reference. The reflection papers and research projects students produced demonstrated an intense creative passion and quality of research and writing skills that other assignments had not.

Similar opportunities to use media to offer theological context for adolescents include Catholic multimedia companies. Cornerstone Media, Inc., for example, publishes engaging monthly e-newsletters with group and classroom activator questions to encourage dialogue on the morality of the lyrics of top-10 songs and music videos and real-life scenarios that students face at school, at home or in their neighborhoods. Using popular songs as a conversation starter helps frame course material in a contemporary context and can create an environment



in which student life outside the school walls is appreciated and shown to have worth. Clean versions of contemporary music videos such as "Live Your Life" by T.I. and Rihanna and "Mercy" by Dave Matthews Band have become classroom favorites with my students and are examples of how an educator can connect students' favorite artists to classroom material on positive life choices and decision-making skills.

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To authentically grow into who they are called to be and recognize their purpose in life, adolescents need leadership roles in local communities (classroom, church) and the opportunity to become self-discoverers. They need to be able to share their stories with a listening, loving and accepting audience. Let us renew the vision we, as educators, have toward the technological culture. Let us offer a Catholic spin on it so our adolescents gain the experience and tools to meet their future challenges and discover *who they are* and *why they are here* as brothers and sisters of Christ.

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