



Why Young Adult Ministry is Different than Youth Ministry

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The Confusion

“So you guys work with youth, right?” is an innocent and common misconception surrounding the Office of Young Adult Ministry. Oftentimes when people hear “young adult,” they think the ministry caters to serving high school students and teenagers. While youth opportunities are wonderful, readily available, and recognizable to many, young adult ministry is decidedly different from youth ministry in its scope and approach. Identifying and understanding the main distinctions between young adult ministry and youth ministry benefits the mission of each. To get to the heart of the variances, Director of Young Adult Ministry for the Archdiocese of St. Louis, Nick Lee, shed light on the subject.

The Variances

Different Life Stages

“A defining characteristic of youth ministry,” began Lee, “is that teenagers largely live under the authority and direction of their parents ... Whereas with young adults, the choice to attend Mass, or become involved with a parish community, involves a more conscious and personal decision.” This choice to participate in the Church or not is influenced by the distinct life situations young adults experience as compared to their more youthful counterparts. Lee highlights the differences in age, lifestyles, and freedom between the two groups.

“Young adult ministry is geared toward serving those between the ages of twenty and forty – and the types of responsibilities and life experiences vary greatly within that age range,” said Lee. The needs and desires of a single, twenty-two year old trying to navigate his first full-time job in a new city is a far cry from those of a married, thirty-five year old with two children. Both need to be ministered to, but it looks different depending on the specific stage of life. Yet, from the research his office has conducted, most young adults yearn for the same things: joy-filled community life, accessibility to the sacraments, engaging preaching and teaching, mentorship, and guidance in discernment.

Different Approaches

According to Lee, the two ministries vary in approach as they attempt to serve the young Church. For many middle school and high school groups, youth ministry aims to familiarize teenagers with the teachings of the Church while encouraging them to develop as Christian witnesses to their peers. This is done through retreats, evenings of Adoration with praise and worship music, small group discussions, and one-on-one mentorship. Young adult ministry, in contrast, is “geared towards equipping people to be leaders right off the bat”. Less time is spent winning people over, and more effort is directed towards helping someone establish a relationship with God, personal apostolate, and authentic community.

Young adult ministry attempts to cultivate leaders by offering a plethora of resources to assist them on their own personal faith journey: [Theology on Tap](#), [Emmaus Group](#) Leadership Training, Round Tables and Young Adult Forums, [Discipulus Institute](#) courses, [Retreats](#), Mission Trips, and local service opportunities. These are just a few of the initiatives that the Office of Young Adult Ministry hosts throughout the year. Offering these opportunities for individuals between the ages of twenty and forty gives young adults the ability to build and find a home within the Church. By giving young adults the tools and vision to become evangelists in their own communities, the ministry acts as a springboard to launch leaders into a life of missionary discipleship.

Going Forth

Lee identifies three ideal characteristics of a young adult leader: compassion, a joy-filled and consistent prayer life, and personal initiative. “Pope Francis, with his continual messages of mercy, teaches us that a true leader must first discern the need within a community, it can be spiritual or material impoverishment...and then they start the process of gathering a community to satisfy that deprivation”, said Lee. Forming a small Emmaus Group community is a natural outflow of someone sensing the desire for young adults peers to be supported spiritually and socially, whereas joining a young adult conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society is born of the recognition that the poor

exist in our neighborhoods not just in third-world countries. By developing the three aforementioned qualities, young adults are well-equipped to be leaders of our “poor Church for the poor.”

Finally, it’s important to note that nearly every major movement in the history of the Catholic Church was initiated by young adults. St. Benedict of Nursia, the father of Western monasticism, was in his early twenties when he left Rome to lead a band of brothers into a life of prayer and work (“ora et labora”). St. Therese of Lisieux who died at the age of 24 initiated a spiritual revolution known as “the little way”. St. Francis wasn’t yet 25 when he became “God’s fool” for the poor and helped establish the European mendicant orders. The “companions of Jesus” (aka the Jesuits) were formed by St. Ignatius of Loyola and six fellow college students from the University of Paris. If history holds true, the next great sea change in the Church will be inaugurated by someone like you and me.

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