

Transforming Teenagers: Integrating Social Justice into Catholic Youth Ministry or Catholic Education

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Abstract

This article investigates transforming teenagers through the process on integrating and implementing social justice concepts and principles into Catholic youth ministry and Catholic secondary and higher education. The essay addresses four aspects concerning social justice and Catholic young people: (1) it briefly studies the ecclesial documents concerning social justice and young people, (2) it looks at integrating Christian social justice concepts and principles into Catholic ministry and academia, (3) it examines the benefits of social justice-learning initiatives, and (4) it discusses two types of social justice-learning initiatives that work well in Catholic youth ministry and Catholic education--praxis-based education and immersion trips.

*"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. That is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant."*ⁱ

Martin Luther King, Jr.
Nobel Prize for Peace Acceptance Speech
December 10, 1964

Introduction

Transforming teenagers into responsible U.S. citizens and faith-oriented Christians is not new for adolescent ministers, high school campus ministers, college campus ministers, and college theology professors. For several decades Catholic youth ministry and Catholic education--secondary and collegiate--has been trying to instill social justice principles and foster social justice values into the lives of Catholic young peopleⁱⁱ with varying degrees of success.

Mark Bauerlein (2009), in his engaging, insightful, and controversial book, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* staunchly maintains that,

Most young Americans [ages 16-22] possess little of the knowledge that makes an informed citizen, and too few of them master the skills needed to negotiate an information-heavy, communication-based society and economy. Furthermore, they avoid the resources and media that might enlighten them and boost their talents. An anti-intellectual outlook prevails in their leisure lives, squashing the lessons of school, and instead of producing a knowledgeable and querulous young mind, the youth culture of American society yields an adolescent consumer enmeshed in juvenile matters and secluded from adult realities. . . . the average 18-year-old cannot name his mayor, congressman, or senator, or remember the last book he/she read, or identify Egypt on a map. (pp. 16-17)

Bauerlein lists each category of learning deficiencies in American teenagers demonstrating it with “piles” of data in history, civics, math, science, technology, fine arts, and literature, thus proving his point that today’s young people--those in high school and college--are America’s intellectually-challenged generation. Although Bauerlein does not mention or measure a young person’s knowledge of theology/religion/Bible, catechetical instruction or social justice initiatives, one can easily glean that those areas of specialization would also fare just as low as the areas Bauerlein does research.

What does the material in *The Dumbest Generation* have to do with Catholic ministry, education, and social justice? Absolutely everything. Today, more than ever, human beings are connected to one another via the technological superhighway and digital revolution. Today’s youth experience information and news at lightning speed and matters of faith, religion, and spirituality are engaged through time-honored traditions and rituals, which conversely do not captivate or motivate young people with lightning speed. Although research indicates that religious activities help to transform teens’ spirituality, religious activities do not always appeal to adolescent sensibilities.

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The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), which was published under the title *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton (2005), investigated the faith lives, religious practices, and spiritual beliefs of thousands of American adolescents. This study is extremely helpful in shedding light on spirituality among American adolescents. Smith and Denton’s findings regarding Catholic teenagers are quite sobering and warrant serious attention.ⁱⁱⁱ The implications for Catholic teenagers are clear: Catholic adolescents are religiously weak and are spiritually anemic. There is a laxity among Catholic adolescents and this “spiritual slackness” is directly connected to spirituality and spiritual activities (Smith & Denton, p. 207). One of the more poignant claims from *Soul Searching*, for the parameters of this essay, is that Catholic teenagers are interested in religious activities, especially those that directly help others such as mission trips, service projects, immersion trips, and social justice-learning experiences but seldom get to participate in them (Smith & Denton, p. 113). Practical and experiential learning are types of education that yield great dividends for young people and give them the chance to serve others and reflect upon their own lives and the living conditions of others through the lenses of social justice.

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Social Justice and Ecclesial Documents Pertaining to Catholic Young People

The United States Catholic Conference (1978) in the religious education document *Sharing the Light of Faith*, defines the term social justice as “the [reality] by which one evaluates the organization and functioning of political, economic, social, and cultural life of society. Positively, the church’s social teaching seeks to apply the Gospel command of love to and within social systems, structures, and institutions.” (p. 93; n. 165) These areas are so important to Catholic life; however, if young people do not experience them or have no exposure to them or do not even think about them as Bauerlein suggests, then it

may be solely up to Catholic ministry and Catholic education to instill social justice principles and foster social justice-learning in young people.

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1998) sternly admits in its document, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*, this sad truth: “Many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of the Catholic faith. This poses a serious challenge for all Catholics, since it weakens our capacity to be a Church that is true to the demands of the Gospel” (p. 3). Social justice and its various virtues--avoiding racism and classism, eradicating discrimination, fighting for gender equality, living for peace, overcoming prejudice, standing in solidarity with the poor, living a life of stewardship, and teaching tolerance--are external practices that evolve from an interior reality of love (Pope Benedict XVI, no. 16, 28b). Love and compassion are the foundational components for social justice and ought to be freely shared by others.

The pioneer Catholic youth ministry document, *A Vision of Youth Ministry* (1976), asserts the importance of social justice. The document eloquently notes that “the justice and service of youth ministry is based on the responsibility of the Church to extend the kingdom of God in the world through service and action on behalf of justice.”

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As a natural out-flowing of the community experience of faith, service and action on behalf of justice should be constitutive dimensions of the Church’s youth ministry. First of all, by exercising moral leadership and sharing its material and human resources, the Church in ministry with youth must live out a commitment to young people and communities who suffer discrimination, poverty, handicaps, and injustice. Second, by providing models, experiences, and programs, the faith community of the Church should fulfill its responsibility to educate youth for justice and to call young people themselves to action on behalf of others A consciousness of the demands of justice and willingness to serve should characterize the overall stance of youth ministry—not confined to specific programs, but penetrating prayer, recreation, creativity, and Christian witness. Both youth and adults engaged in youth ministry should strive to

deepen their sensitivity to the innate dignity of all persons and to the right of each individual to fulfill his or her fullest potential. (p. 18)

Living social justice teachings and living for mercy and compassion are not mere abstractions or deemed as something nebulous but are definite elements that constitute social justice, a reality that deserves achievement. The *Vision's* (1976) words help to reiterate the Gospel values of service, justice, mercy, charity, peace, and compassion and their significance for young people. Social justice ministry helps balance adolescent spirituality and deepens a young person's faith life and helps expand the teenage worldview, which is usually myopically limited in scope and personal experience.

The most recent youth ministry document, *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (1997), strongly advocates that a vibrant and comprehensive youth ministry provides a strong component of justice and service. The document reads,

Our faith calls us to work for justice; to serve those in need; to pursue peace; and to defend the life, dignity, and rights of all our sisters and brothers. This is the call of Jesus, the urging of the Spirit, the challenge of the prophets, and the living tradition of our Church. (p. 37)

“Campus ministry is called to be a consistent and vigorous advocate for justice, peace, and the reverence for all life.”

It is paramount that those who work with young people do not merely conduct outreach activities but offer theological reflection on the personal and communal experience to balance and ground the reality of the social justice experience. Christian service is not merely helping people in need; it is also empowering others to transform their lives. Stephen J. Pope (2010) maintains that experiential learning that incorporates social justice initiatives stimulate personal growth and social transformation (p. 133).

The Catholic campus ministry document *Empowered by the Spirit* (1985) strongly encourages campus ministers of high school and college to educate young people about social justice. The document calls Catholic campus ministers to have a threefold foci with young people: (1) to search for justice on campus, (2)

to teach the principles of Catholic social justice, and (3) to work for social justice.

The document states,

Campus ministry is called to be a consistent and vigorous advocate for justice, peace, and the reverence for all life. All the baptized should understand that "action on behalf of justice is a significant criterion of the Church's fidelity to its missions. It is not optional, nor is it the work of only a few in the Church. It is something to which all Christians are called according to their vocations, talents, and situations in life." With this in mind, campus ministers have the responsibility of keeping alive the vision of the Church on campus as a genuine servant community that is dedicated to the works of justice, peace, and reverence for life, in all stages of its development. (n. 73)

Empowered by the Spirit encourages campus ministers to empower young people to work towards and to live by social justice teachings of the Catholic Church. Avoiding racism and classism, eradicating discrimination, and fighting for gender equality are culturally relevant and timely topics for college students to discern and take action upon. College is the perfect time and college students are at the right age to think critically about social justice issues, initiate protests, and organizes marches for social causes they believe strongly about.

Moreover, campus ministers also can be advocates for young people to express themselves and find appropriate and meaningful experiences that create social justice-learning and that provide long-lasting affects for both high school and college students. Therefore, high school and college campus ministers are charged with the important task of empowering young people with the social gospel and mission of the Church, a task that advocates for the vulnerable, less fortunate, and disadvantaged.

Another significant document for young people is *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults* (1997), which is directed towards young adults 18-30 years of age. The document has a section on Christian service and addresses the importance for Catholic young adults to be engaged in the service and social justice mission of the Catholic Church. The

document encourages young people to live “the call to holiness, community, and service through lived faith” (p. 18). The whole Catholic Church provides the necessary support for young adults to be disciples of Christ: living their faith in community (*koinonia*), nourished by Sunday worship and sustained through the sacraments (*letourgia*), proclaiming the word of the prophets of old and of Jesus Christ (*kerygma*), and serving humanity with compassion, action, and love (*diakonia* and *caritas*) are the deepest expressions of the Church (Benedict XVI, no. 25a). Whether adolescents or young adults, young Catholics as the Young Church are called to participate fully in the social justice ministry of the Catholic Church.

The social justice teachings of the Catholic Church are not merely lip-service but are profound words that Catholic bishops expect the *Christifideles laici* to faithfully engage in to help them contribute to the transformation of the world. The influential words of social justice that are found in the ecclesiastical sources mentioned above did not appear out of thin air but are rooted in Scripture and tradition. The importance of these social justice teachings to Catholic ministry and Catholic education are twofold: (1) they provide Catholic adolescent ministers and Catholic educators with a clear understanding of the role that social justice plays in the life of Catholic adolescents and young adults and (2) they offer pastoral insights that can be turned into pastoral methods and strategies which can be successfully integrated into the life of parish youth ministry, campus ministry, and classroom, and ultimately into the lives of Catholic young people.

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Integrating Christian Social Justice Concepts and Principles Directly into a Parish Youth Ministry and Catholic Education Curriculum

Introducing young people to social justice must begin with serving others. The challenge and call for those who work with young people is to move beyond random acts of kindness and simple outreach and into the work of social justice. Oftentimes a high school student or college student’s worldview needs shifting;

therefore, social justice activities and initiatives must move beyond random acts of kindness, to be grounded in charity, and move toward a holistic understanding of social justice, which respects human dignity and views all people as God's good and holy creation (Canales, 2004; p. 44).

Perhaps it is worthwhile to address *Renewing the Vision's* (1997) interpretation of the importance of integrating social justice into a comprehensive youth ministry. RTV maintains that the ministry of social justice should have distinct features that provide young people with solid direction, action, and programming. The document offers six important reasons for integrating techniques for doing social justice ministry. The document asserts that social justice ministry

1. **engages** young people in discovering the call to justice and service in the Scriptures, in the life of Jesus, and in Christian social teaching;
2. **involves** adolescents, their families, and parish communities in actions of direct service to those in need and in efforts to address the causes of injustice and inequality;
3. **develops** the assets, skills, and faith of young people by promoting gospel values in their lifestyles and choices; by increasing positive self-esteem, self-confidence, and moral reasoning abilities; by building leadership, and social skills; by helping them discover their personal gifts and abilities; by helping them learn that they can make a difference in the world and receive recognition by the community for their contributions;
4. **incorporates** doing the right thing with attention to why and how we do what we do (four elements guide

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adolescents in moving from awareness to action on the issues of justice):

- a. *involvement* helps adolescents connect with justice issues personally and experientially;
 - b. *exploration* helps adolescents understand the causes, connections, and consequences of justice issues—expanding their knowledge and moving them toward action with a stronger background and motivation to work for real change when faced with injustice;
 - c. *reflection* helps adolescents utilize the Scriptures, Catholic social teachings, and the lived faith of the church community to discern a faith response to justice issues;
 - d. *action* helps adolescents respond to injustice through direct service or actions of social change—locally or globally, short term or long term;
5. *includes* a supportive community that builds a sense of togetherness, nurtures a life of justice and service, works together to serve and act for justice, and provides support and affirmation;
6. *nurtures* a lifelong commitment to service and justice involvement (this includes providing opportunities, support, and follow-up to help the young people reflect on their experience; people who learn to serve when they are young are more likely to be service-oriented throughout their lives). (pp.39-40)

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These six areas are helpful for those who minister to Catholic adolescents and who teach Catholic young adults. They are also useful in planning, coordinating, and implementing the various social justice programs in both Catholic ministry and academia.

The integration of Christian social justice concepts and teachings are paramount to Catholic youth ministry and Catholic education. Too many parish and campus ministries only offer service programs without concentrating on the integration of social justice issues which include classism, gender concerns, homelessness, intolerance, joblessness, poverty, racism, and sexism. Furthermore, Catholic parish youth ministers are notorious for *not* providing young people with theological reflection about the social justice issues surrounding outreach projects and discerning those issues and their relevance to Christian living and bringing it into a prayerful context (Canales, 2006; p. 67).

Ronald Krietemeyer (2002) indicates that the ethical responsibility and moral imperative for passing on Catholic social teaching falls on every youth minister and Catholic educator and “plays a fundamental role in teaching students about the Church’s social mission in a structured manner” (p. 47). One of the primary duties of parish youth ministers, campus ministers, and Catholic educators is to ensure that the Christian social teachings are applicable to the contemporary world and to real life issues that teenagers may face on a regular basis. For example, in larger cities across the United States, especially southern and warmer cities, there is an abundance of the homeless and on many street corners the homeless beg for money, food, or work. This may be a situation that merits discussion and the planning and implementation of a social justice initiative.

A pastoral strategy concerning racism -- or in reality avoiding racism-- and teaching tolerance to young people may seem unnecessary but in the deep south there are still some “pockets” of prejudice that practice the ideas of the Ku Klux Klan. One simple way to teach students tolerance and to break down the

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walls of racism is to have students watch a movie that highlights the topic such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *The Color Purple* (1985), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), *Amistad* (1997), *American History X* (1999), *Monsters Ball* (2002), *A Day Without a Mexican* (2004), and *Gran Torino* (2009); of course, these are only a few movies that can be used to implement social justice-learning with young people regarding racism. After viewing the movie have students break into small faith-sharing groups with specific questions that pertain to the film and the issue being discussed.

Another method for helping to eradicate discrimination is to plan a trip to a city in the south such as Selma, Alabama, Little Rock, Arkansas, or Philadelphia, Mississippi, and expose students to the rawness and grittiness of those places while walking in the footsteps of the African-Americans who lived through those tumultuous times. Visiting memorials or listening to stories of the elderly who may have had first-hand experiences of brutality and racism will expose them to experience solidarity and empathy and will lead them to intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. Therefore, teaching about specific social justice teachings that surround racism and gender issues would be a fruitful dialogue for high school and college students to engage in and learn from.

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Another method of integrating Christian social teachings is to offer workshops or evening lecture series that provide high school and college students with theology concerning and discussion of social justice issues such as homelessness and hunger, peace and non-violence, discrimination and racism, and solidarity and stewardship. An example of such a workshop or evening lecture series is to offer a “Christian Social Justice Series” which highlights the various social justice teachings of the Catholic Church. Such a lecture series could provide presentations once a week that represent the “flavor” of Catholic social thought. Some of the presentations may be the following:

Presentation # 1: Dignity and Equality of the Human Person

Presentation # 2: Rights and Responsibilities

Presentation # 3: The Social Nature of Humanity

Presentation # 4: The Common Good

Presentation # 5: Subsidiarity

Presentation # 6: Solidarity

Presentation # 7: Fundamental Option for the Poor

Presentation # 8: Stewardship

These presentations will thoroughly ground young people with Catholic social principles and allow them to connect their faith with larger global realities that other people endure on a daily basis. The lecture series will serve as a guiding focus for them throughout their lives, and they will be able to remember the concepts and principles that were presented and discussed.

A further responsibility for youth ministers and theological-minded educators is to integrate the Bible into the curriculum and to teach directly from it as a source of divine revelation and divine inspiration regarding themes of social justice, such as the common good, the fundamental option for the poor, solidarity, and stewardship. Finally, it is the moral obligation of those who minister to and teach theology to teenagers and college students to implement social justice experiences that afford young people with catechetical and learning opportunities that serve the needy (homeless, hungry, children, the poor, prisoners) and benefit the greater community in which the service is offered. For instance, a college professor who teaches a social justice class may want to take her/his students on a field trip to visit and spend time with teenagers at a youth prison or detention center. This can be an extremely rewarding experience for college students because it allows them to be role models to incarcerated juveniles and it gives them a sense of giving back to the community.

Krietemeyer (2002) observes that high school students and college students “need to learn not only the value of volunteer charity, but also the Christian mandate to work for basic justice and human rights of all” (p. 52). Social justice experiences and social justice-learning opportunities are excellent

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pragmatic tools which help to educate young people about the larger implications of systemic social issues as well as help them to affirm and live by Christian social justice principles.

The Benefits of Social Justice-Learning Initiatives

It is extremely important for anyone who works with Catholic young people to integrate social justice themes and to infuse theological reflection into social justice-learning^{iv} and experiential methodology. Social justice-learning, also called praxis-based education, is an excellent way for high school students and college students to comprehend the impact of their social action experience. Constance Fourné (2003) reports “personal experience is the best method of jolting people’s consciousness in such a way that they begin to ask more profound questions” (p. 49). The asking of more insightful questions and the format and process to ask the reflective questions, to discern issues, and to think critically are the educational ingredients of social justice-learning. Social justice-learning is a medium to teach the values of social justice within a pastoral setting or academic setting. Social justice-learning provides young people the capability of reflecting on and discussing the service component of justice.

Social justice-learning has three essential components which can be easily adapted and facilitated within a pastoral or academic setting: (1) provide real and tangible service opportunities to the community; (2) create structured theological reflection, which is integrated throughout the learning process; and (3) integrate outreach, service, and justice issues into the youth ministry and educational curricula. The following is an example of social justice-learning adapted from the National Youth Leadership Council and the Saint Paul, Minnesota Public School District (2006):

- Cleaning up a river bank or lakeshore area is service.
- Sitting in a biology classroom, looking at water samples under a microscope is learning.

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- Biology students meeting state standards by taking samples from local water sources, then analyzing the samples, documenting the results, presenting the scientific data to a pollution control agency, and discussing the impact these results may have on future pollution control issues and our own behaviors is service-learning.
- Discussing the importance and impact that clean water has on a community, especially a poor community or an impoverished country is social-justice learning (p. 13)

Social justice-learning is an avenue that challenges high school and college teenagers to discover areas that were once unknown to them in creative and collaborative ways. Social justice-learning is also an exceptional integration methodology that will help youth ministers, high school religion teachers, college campus ministers, and college theology professors to empower their students about social justice themes, principles, and concepts.

“Solidarity is learned through ‘contact’ rather than through ‘concepts’.”

Jesuit Superior General, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach (2008), refers to social justice-learning as praxis-based education that he links to solidarity. Kolvenbach states,

Solidarity is learned through “contact” rather than through “concepts.” Personal involvement with innocent suffering, with the injustice others suffer, is the catalyst for solidarity, which then gives rise to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection. Students, in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering, and engage it constructively. They should learn to perceive, think, judge, choose, and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed. (p. 155)

As a result of social justice-learning, one of the major benefits is solidarity, and this makes it an indispensable component of ministry formation and academic education. There are numerous social justice-learning methodologies, strategies, and activities which can be addressed and analyzed.

However, there are two types of social justice-learning initiatives that merit serious attention in the discussion of transforming teenagers and integrating social justice into Catholic youth ministry and Catholic education: (1) praxis-based education and (2) immersion trips.

Praxis-Based Education

According to Mark Ravizza (2010) praxis-based education has tangible and lasting impact upon Catholic high school students and college students. There are four dimensions of praxis-based education that help to shape Catholic identity, spirituality, and faith-formation in young people: (1) academic and pastoral reflection rooted in reality, (2) integrated community learning, (3) recollection and pedagogical accompaniment, and (4) formation of Christo-centric imagination (Ravizza, pp. 113-125).

An academic and pastoral reflection rooted in reality provides young people with “hands-on” experience, which shapes their worldview and shifts their individualistic paradigm; it opens the door for fairness, objectivity, and solidarity with issues that others struggle with such as poverty, racism, gender equality, and classism; theological reflection in ministry and academic settings also aid the minister/professor to craft lesson plans that require students’ input and experience, which connects theory and praxis (Ravizza, pp. 114-115). An integrated community learning experience affords young people with the opportunity to conceptualize learning through praxis sites rather than lectures in a classroom; it encourages deeper reflection, involved sharing, and discernment of concepts that become alive and lived experiences as distinct from theory; it is a more holistic and intentional learning that is experienced by individual and community (Ravizza, p. 117). A recollection and pedagogical accompaniment refers to the self-awareness that takes place within students as a result of praxis experience, their shared experiences in community, and their personal and prior history. This takes place by reflecting on their own brokenness and suffering

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while resonating with social justice concepts or wrestling with theological and philosophical theories which captivate their minds and hearts to discern God's direction. A recollection and pedagogical accompaniment is a methodology that focuses on engaging students to comprehend their praxis encounter and to articulate their social justice experience to the praxis sites where they learned firsthand from the pastoral involvement (Ravizza, p. 119). A formation of Christo-centric imagination connects praxis-based education with the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth and centers social justice in Christ's *kenosis* or self-emptying. A Christo-centric imagination points to the trust that young people must go through as they put their faith in Christ as the hope of God impacts the students as well as the marginalized and disenfranchised to whom they minister. It is providing hope to people who are oftentimes helpless and stuck in deep despair and feel overwhelmed and burdened with day-to-day struggles, and offering them Christ's eternal hope along with pragmatic solutions helps to transform their situation (Ravizza, pp. 124-125).

As a result of integrating these four dimensions, either in a pastoral setting or academic setting, young people will be able to learn, grow, and mature into social justice oriented adults. As Kolvenbach (2008) notes, "When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change." (p. 156) Those who work with young people and incorporate praxis-based education into their curriculum will resonate and testify to its veracity.

The rewards of integrating social justice-learning such as praxis-based education into a parish youth ministry or college classrooms are numerous. Thomas East (2004) offers four recommendations for the successful integration of praxis-based education within Catholic ministry and Catholic education: (1) plan long-term trips or extended service opportunities that require training; (2) use planning teams that include both young people and adults to highlight the importance of group implementation; (3) train and support core leaders and catechists in the fundamentals and guidelines of social justice and (4) collaborate

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with other parish staff, other parishes, other schools, other colleges, and other diocesan and national organizations to help coordinate Christian social justice initiatives beyond the local community and local diocese (pp. 54-55). These four recommendations afford high school and college youth the opportunities to experience life beyond their horizons and can lead to the transformation of the world.

Constance Fourré (2003) lists eight reasons for promoting and integrating social justice and praxis-based education into Catholic ministry and academic curricula.

- First, praxis-based education “attaches emotion to learning, which common sense and brain-based learning research both show clearly improves the quality of learning” (p. 50). Quality comprehension is an aim for those working with young people; therefore, since service-learning enhances brain-based learning it will give much creditability to a youth minister’s or theology teacher’s programming.
- Second, praxis-based education “raises the stakes for students” (p. 50). If students must research and present information at some forum then they are more likely to be more serious about the project.
- Third, praxis-based education “uses multiple-intelligence” (p. 50). During praxis-based education programs students may be asked to do specific skills that require more than reading, writing, and arithmetic, such as plotting a course using a compass or navigating a blueprint.
- Fourth, praxis-based education “promotes critical-thinking” (p. 50). Critical-thinking is an alternative approach to learning through memorization, which helps to create less predictable learning outcomes.
- Fifth, praxis-based education “promotes applied learning” (p. 51). In other words, experiential learning has real and applicable dimensions for daily life, which can be incorporated into a young person’s routine.

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- Sixth, praxis-based education “improves retention”^v (p. 50). This is a significant claim because youth ministers and theology teachers are usually concerned about the amount of information that gets “absorbed” into a young person and the amount of information that is retained.
- Seventh, praxis-based education “improves attendance” (p. 51). Predominately attendance is a phenomenon that affects schools more than youth ministries, since youth ministries are purely a voluntary enterprise; nevertheless, if service-learning has been associated with greater gains in attendance then it is another excellent reason to integrate it into Catholic youth ministry and education curricula.
- Eighth, praxis-based education “is a particularly useful strategy for at-risk students because it is a change from their previous experience of schooling” (p. 51). Since this type of “hands-on” learning affects at-risk young people, it can be implemented in urban, rural, and inner-city areas as well as ministry and academic settings. Therefore, praxis-based education is by no means limited to middle-class or suburban Caucasian teenagers and young adults.

“Moral transformation moves a person to think, act, and live differently.”

Praxis-based education is a vehicle of education that can create not only social justice-learners in the community but also servant-leaders who can do service outside the local community. Beyond praxis-based education is another great method for enhancing social justice-learning and education--immersion trips.

Immersion Trips

An absolutely wonderful type of social justice opportunity which helps to transform high school and college students is full immersion trips. Immersion trips place young people in usually different surroundings, encountering different cultures, and living in a different country for an extended period of time. According to Stephen J. Pope (2010) personal transformation occurs on four

levels and immersion trips promote this change within young people. The four types of transformation that young people may experience as a direct result of immersion trips are: (1) social transformation, (2) moral transformation, (3) spiritual transformation, and (4) affective and cognitive personal transformation. Social transformation evolves within a person; it is a gradual awakening of ideas, concepts, and realities; a process of changing the mind and the heart (*metanoia*); it evokes a greater sense of communal responsibility and accountability (Pope, p. 133). Moral transformation moves a person to think, act, and live differently; it encompasses the willingness to be conscientious about social issues and/or economic concerns which affect another person's well-being; it reduces sentimentalities from an "us" and "we" scenario and promotes solidarity with the marginalized (Pope, p. 137). Spiritual transformation pertains to a young person's development to the sacred and to a sense of reverence with God; it is a deeper realization and self-actualization that comes from one's personal journey of conversion; a personal ascent of faith in God, and ultimately, in the identification with the Catholic Church as a profound agent of social justice, and trusting in and belonging to the larger mission of Jesus the Christ (Pope, p. 138). Affective and cognitive personal transformation are in reality the byproducts of social, moral, and spiritual transformation; young people may encounter powerful emotions while embarking upon a social justice experience such as an immersion trip which can affect their attitude and behavior in intentional ways; emotionally charged experiences may elicit a paradigm shift in commitments, interests, friendships, and decision-making; a deeper cognitive awareness may inspire students to "tackle" more profound social issues that impact the global community (Pope, p. 140).

"...a deeper cognitive awareness may inspire students to 'tackle' more profound social issues that impact the global community."

An example of this transformation as a direct result of an immersion trip could be this scenario. A 20-year old international business and marketing student volunteers to participate in an Alternative Spring Break offered through the college which takes a group of 20 students on a mission trip to Santa Rita,

Honduras. After a week of being with the Honduran people of Santa Rita, the student returns back to the United States and to the college with a very different attitude about helping others and about classism. The student now has a new understanding of poverty and a new sense of classism because of the firsthand opportunity to meet and work alongside the people in Honduras. Here is where the affective, social, moral, and spiritual transformation occurs. As a direct result of the one-week immersion trip to Honduras, the international business and marketing student decides to concentrate and minor in not-for-profit business and philanthropy and to accentuate the major field of study. The student now has a new interior passion to help the poor and to investigate the ways to eradicate classism and other areas impacted by poverty.

Immersion trips have the ability to foster a deep sense of discipleship, instill Christian values, contribute to the mission of the Church, and promote solidarity with the marginalized, disenfranchised, and oppressed. Immersion trips “plop” young people directly into the gritty realities of social poverty and personal despair, which is typically a startling contrast to the way the majority of American middle class high school students and college students live. The tangible and raw encounters and exposures that young people make with those who are severely less fortunate than they are is often a catalyst for change and transformation. Immersion trips afford Catholic young people such interaction. Immersion trips empower Catholic young people to look beyond their oftentimes limited worldview and to experience the world anew with a fresh pair of social lenses. Immersion trips encourage young people to “stretch” themselves to look beyond race and ethnicity and to embrace new cultures; to create a world that does not judge people by class, gender, and sexuality but sees people as children of God created in *imago Dei*.

Conclusion

Transforming teenagers is a process, at times an arduous process, but one that can be achieved through Catholic social teachings, integrating social justice concepts and principles into Catholic ministry and education curricula, and by the exposure of praxis-based education and immersion trips.

The Department of Social Development and World Peace (1993) wrote a beautiful document titled *Communities of Salt and Light*, which encourages, challenges, and mandates that justice and service are constitutive virtues and core beliefs to the entire People of God:

The central message is simple: our faith is profoundly social. We cannot be called truly “Catholic” unless we hear and heed the Church’s call to serve those in need and work for justice and peace. We cannot call ourselves followers of Jesus unless we take up his mission of bringing “good news to the poor, liberty to captives, and new sight to the blind [cf. Luke 4:18].” (p. 3)

“It seems that there may be great hope for the ‘Dumbest Generation.’”

This social justice document empowers Catholic youth ministers, high school theology teachers, college campus ministers, and college theology professors to develop and maintain quality social justice initiatives and service-learning programs.

It seems that there may be great hope for the “Dumbest Generation” and that Mark Bauerlein might not be totally accurate when it pertains to Catholic adolescents and young adults. If, and when, Catholic young people decide to dedicate their time, even in a limited capacity, to social justice issues that overcome world problems, then real transformation takes place and has the great potential of being contagious. The world needs “infectious” teenagers to regenerate themselves into caring and compassionate young people with a zest for serving others while meeting the world’s needs. This type of social justice regeneration needs role models and advocates, and youth ministers, campus ministers, high school theology teachers, and college theology professors have a responsibility to lead the way for young people on their quest for social justice.

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ⁱ Martin Luther King Jr., (1964), Nobel Prize for Peace Acceptance Speech; contained in Fred Kammer, S.J. (1995) *Salted with Fire: Spirituality for the Faithjustice Journey* (New York, NY: Paulist Press), p. 99.

ⁱⁱ Through this article the term “young people” will be used as an encompassing term that refers to both middle adolescence (ages 15-18) and late adolescence (ages 19-22), those typical high school and college age years. Moreover, throughout this study the terms “teenagers” and “young adults” will also be used; unless otherwise stated the term *teenagers* will refer to high school aged students and the term *young adults* to college age students.

ⁱⁱⁱ Christian Smith and Melinda L. Denton’s investigation and evaluation was not based on just a few sample interviews. Rather, their evaluation was based on a national representative sample of hundreds of Catholic teenagers who were questioned over the telephone about their religious and spiritual beliefs. There were also face-to-face interviews which were also a nationally representative sub-sample of the original teenagers that had completed the telephone survey. For more information see Smith and Denton (2005), *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press) pp. 193-217. There is an issue of the questions that were posed to Catholic youth and their understanding of the questions asked, and did those questions rightly reflect Catholic jargon and Catholic culture. At any rate, the findings are still rather alarming.

^{iv} The term *social justice-learning* refers to experiential learner that is specific to enhancing young people’s knowledge about social justice issues and is committed to expanding their comprehension of the Catholic Church’s social justice teachings and principles. In this essay social justice-learning is *not* tantamount to service-learning since not all service-learning is focused on social justice issues and concerns.

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^v The term *retention* in this article refers to the academic and intellectual information attained and learned by a young person through the process of praxis-based education. Retention in this case does *not* refer to an academic institution’s ability to keep students enrolled in a specific college or program.