

Catholic Youth Ministry: Pay Now or Pay Later

By Mary Beth Bonacci

Originally posted in 1997; reposted 9/19/16.

Doing the work I do, I come into contact with a lot of Catholic youth ministers. I speak at youth ministry conferences. I work with parish and diocesan youth ministers. And I have friends in youth ministry. In talking to them lately, I'm noticing an alarming level of burnout. They're tired. They're frustrated. They're struggling. A vast majority are facing some sort of ongoing physical and emotional burnout.

Of course, there are a lot of reasons for that. Teenagers have a lot of energy and a lot of needs. And Satan loves to attack anyone who is sharing the love of Christ. But over and over again they tell me that their most difficult struggles are financial. Most husbands and fathers in youth ministry find that they can't support their families on their youth ministry income. As a result, either their wives work, they take second jobs, or often both. These men, all clearly spiritually gifted, feel torn between their profound calling to share the Gospel with Catholic teenagers and their duties as husband, father and provider.

Does anyone else see a problem here?

"Well," some people say. "He should know that youth ministry doesn't pay anything. Why doesn't he go out and get a real job?"

And that, my friends, is the crux of the problem. Why isn't youth ministry (or any other Catholic ministry, for that matter) considered a "real" job? We live in a society which is openly hostile to Christian values. Our communications media is filled with damaging, degrading images that our youth seem to inhale along with the air they breathe. Our schools are the targets of every bizarre social experiment that bored administrators can dream up, allowing anything and everything but prayer.

Our hope for the future is in our youth. They are the Catholic Church of the 21st century. Their formation (or lack thereof) will determine how the Church of Christ will move forward (or backward) with her mission of saving souls. No work on earth could possibly be more important.

And yet we consider youth ministry a "side" job to be done by volunteers or by some recent college graduate willing to spend a few years in poverty before moving on to a "real" job.

That's pathetic.

Compare this to the larger Protestant churches. Their churches have a staff position called youth pastor – a career position. A youth pastor's job is to insure that the teenagers of the parish are supported in their faith, and that they have access to a spiritual life and a social life which is consistent with the Gospel message. For that, he is paid a real salary – the kind that a father can support a family, build some savings, buy a middle-class house and send his kids to college on. A man can aspire to be a youth pastor in the same way he aspires to be an accountant or an architect. He can follow his heart and his vocation without having to marry into money or moonlight his entire life.

Why aren't we doing this? A lot of reasons, I'm sure. As Catholics, we've historically had priests and religious running our programs. We're not used to having a payroll. And priests still set the salaries and sign the paychecks – priests who, being largely supported by the diocese, really don't have an accurate understanding of how much money it takes to support a family in this day and age. (Hint: 20-something thousand a year isn't nearly enough.)

"But the money just isn't there in the Catholic Churches." True enough. A big part of the problem starts in the pews. We Catholics don't crack our wallets like we should. When evangelical Christians want to build a church, they have to pony up their cash and build it. They understand the necessity of tithing – without it, they have no church. We, on the other hand, often tend to see the Church as a "free service" that we're somehow entitled to.

But in the end, there's no use pointing fingers at each other. Priests and parishioners, we need to work together to change things. We need active, thriving Catholic youth programs. We need to give our teens an experience of their faith. We need to give them a social life protected from the dangers of modern society. We need to give them good, Godly friendships. There are excellent resources out there (the Life Teen program is my personal favorite), but they require stable, ongoing, dedicated people to bring them to life. And in order to do that, we need to put our money where our priorities are.

Priests – how do you come up with money when you really need it? When it's time to repave the parking lot, or when you need a new building, you beat the bushes and get the money. You ask from the pulpit. You seek out your wealthier parishioners. You look for grant money. Why not do the same to hire a good youth minister? Aren't the youth of your parish more important than the condition of the parking lot?

Parents – if you want your parish to have a quality, long-term youth minister, get together and pony up the cash. Be creative. Join together with other parishes. Hire one person for a multi-parish program. Just do something. You'd be buying your teen and the teens of your community a stable, holy environment where they could learn about God, have fun and make friends. You'd increase the odds that they'll survive their teen years unscathed and will continue to practice their faith as adults. I can't think of a better investment.

I'm very serious about this. I think that the ongoing neglect of our youth ministry programs (and our youth ministers) has been a sin, and that we as members of the Church will have to answer for it some day. The first step is to give them some stability, and that requires money.

We can pay now, or we can pay later.

Bonacci is a frequent lecturer on chastity. Copyright 1997 Arlington Catholic Herald, Inc. All rights reserved.