

THE ADOLESCENT

The World of the Adolescent -- The adolescent is truly a "nowhere person" living in a "nowhere land." Again and again, the adolescent is confronted with their status as "teenager" and yet asked to conform to the adult world. While those around them ask for maturity, they seek the security of their childhood. The conflicts of all people are noticeably present in them.

Life vs. Contingency -- The teenager seeks to live life to the fullest. Their vocabulary is replete with phrases that tell us this. They want to "live it up" and go "where the action is." Yet they know, too, that this life is not forever. Few adolescents have not touched, or been touched by the death of a relative or friend or have not questioned the WHY of suffering. How can their problem be solved? For many, the solution lies in trying to ignore their uncertain state by trying to enter into frenzied action.

Independence vs. Dependence -- The need for the adolescent to break away from the ties of childhood cannot be disputed. Nowhere does there exist a person who is more eager to prove their independence than the teenager. The teen of 1980 seeks as many status symbols as possible to prove their independence. Witness the large number of teenagers who own their own cars. Yet the teen is dependent on many persons. Not the least of those are their parents. Small wonder, then, that many teenagers rebel for years against their parents. The family is symbolic of the dependence that the teenager seeks to shake off.

Presence vs. Aloneness -- Another tension in the adolescent's life is the struggle they experience between their need to be alone and the loneliness they feel when others are not present. Symptomatic of this is their eagerness to join clubs and their apparent lack of responsibility in not attending meetings.

Responsibility vs. Escapism -- The adolescent actively seeks responsibilities. They want a "job." Yet they seem to run from the tasks that are theirs. This only is only one indication of a basic tension--their need to be responsible and their desire to escape responsibility.

Personal vs. Self-Centeredness -- The teenager feels, in an especially intense way, the tension that all people feel between their need for interpersonal relationships and their desire to exist for themselves alone. Until their teen years, the child is not really capable of deep interpersonal relationships. Since the experience is relatively new to them now, they have difficulty in reconciling these relationships and the giving they demand with the need they feel to gratify their own desires.

World vs. Ghettoism -- Until their teen years, the child's prime community has been the home. Now they are asked to broaden their horizons of their community, even to the world. The need to have a world vision produces a tension in the adolescent. Their world expands slowly. Like all people, they seek the security of the group they know. This explains the nature of peer relationships. It is at this time that we see them seeking the security of cliques, gangs, and teen clubs.

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Where is the Answer? -- The teen, like all people, must be brought to the realization that the only answer to their tensions is God the Father. He, the God who creates, tells them the meaning of life. He, who sends his son as Liberator, tells youth the meaning of independence. He, Emmanuel, God with us, offers youth His presence. As God of the Covenant, he calls the teen to responsibility and reality. The overpowering relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit--their perfect openness and self-giving leads the youth into the deepest of interpersonal relationships. He, God of the people, answers the teen's needs to reach beyond their closed circle and to be one with all mankind in the solidarity of the Church.

The Challenge -- The realization of these overpowering needs and their fulfillment comes not in a single moment. It is the task of religious educators to make the realization possible. "If Christ remains a stranger to most of our students, is it not because the Church no longer means for them the source and fullness of life, of goodness, of freedom that Jesus Christ was and is? The primary failure of our catechetical programs, apart from the deliberate and free rejection of the student, seem to lie in this. Revelation no longer appears as good news. Too frequently, the adolescent is told what they cannot do; they are told what they must learn. They are given restrictions to follow and questions to study. It is not the call to freedom, human fulfillment, salvation, love." What greater challenge could there be? How do we again present Christ's message as good news, as the answer to the adolescent's most fundamental needs? Obviously, the content is still there. What remains is to allow youth to confront their real needs in the light of revelation. Only then will they be able to welcome the message of salvation as the good news that they are eager to hear.

Adult Faith -- To make this possible, it is necessary to understand these young persons with whom we are working. Our aim is to prepare the youth for an adult faith. Adult faith is more than a mastery of theological truths. It is more, even than the acceptance of these truths. Adult faith demands response in the ever-deepening relationship between the believer and the three divine persons.

Help Them Grow -- In order to help the adolescent grow in an awareness of this relationship, we must see in the teenager those things that make them different from an adult.

Variety -- Teenagers look for variety. While the child's attention span is related to time, the adolescent's is related to variety. They look for the new, the novel, the different. Good religious education must offer a variety of programs; furthermore, within the programs themselves there must be variety, straight lecture, discussion, only audio visual materials--none of these will satisfy the adolescent. Variety also answers the problem of the various degrees of faith development among youth. Some teen programs geared to their desire for intellectual fulfillment. Others desire a program developed around their need to articulate.

Freedom -- Ours is an age of freedom. Nowhere is there a more willing marcher, a more avid banner maker, a more eager ringer of the bell of freedom than among the youth of 1980. One needs only to observe the high school and college campuses to hear the cry for freedom. We have long, in academic circles, recognized this need and operated on an elective basis in our educational institutions. A program for teenagers in religious education must also include freedom of choice. So that this freedom is not merely taken, it should exist both on the level of program choice and also within the program itself.

Personal Involvement -- Youth would rather do than talk about doing. This is definitely to the advantage of the religious educator. The teen's desire to be personally involved prevents them from mere intellectual acceptance of Christianity. Faith required the involvement of the total person. Anything less will be reflected by youth, thus religious education programs must offer the teenager the opportunity for personal involvement.

Parental Involvement -- If religious education is to be effective, parents need to be involved. A child or youth shares in the faith of the adult community. Generally, they must see this adult faith in their parents and their close adult acquaintances. Otherwise programs of religious education will be largely inadequate. Parents need to be kept informed. In addition, their direct involvement influences the strength for the youth's religious education.

Parish Centered -- While the prime Christian community is the home, the larger community is the Parish. Since the Parish should be a reflection of the universal Church in miniature, teens need to identify with it.

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