

Reigniting the Light: Reaching Catholic Young Adults in the Digital World

Let's Start from the Top

As a church, we have come a long way with youth ministry programs since the 1970s, growing and adapting to the needs of our youth. This, too, applies to campus ministry programs within our Catholic schools. Administrators are beginning to understand the importance of developing one's faith during adolescence, alongside academics and extra-curricular activities; the need to live one's faith while at the same time learning about it. Therefore, Catholic high school students, whether or not they want to, are immersed in their Catholic identity. A Catholic high school campus is a safe, familiar, and typically small place to express one's faith. Students are provided with opportunities to discuss their faith – Theology classes, retreats, etc. – with peers. They may do it willingly, hesitantly, or begrudgingly, but they do it nonetheless. While there are students who identify themselves as agnostic or atheist, one can also find students who are eager to share their faith, who love God and are not afraid to spread the Gospel.

As a high school Campus Minister, I see students on all points of this “faith spectrum.” I have had conversations with a number of students, unique in their own (faith) ways, who love going to a school where they are able to express their Catholic faith in ways beyond a classroom setting, including school-wide Masses, class retreats, various prayer experiences, and confession opportunities. I have also had discussions with these same students after they graduate from high school who tell me that they miss the ability to express their faith every day. The conversation usually goes as follows:

Me: *"Hey _____ ! We miss seeing you on campus! How's life, school, work?"*
 Student: *"I'm doing great! I love what I'm doing right now, having fun and adjusting to a new way of life. But I miss this school so much!"*
 Me: *"Really? But it sounds like you're having a great time. What do you miss?"*

Student: *"To be honest, I miss the routine, the way this school feels like a family, and all the things we did together. I miss being able to talk about my faith without it seeming like I'm weird."*

It seems like we, as a Church, are doing a great job with our youth, thanks to concepts such as Comprehensive Youth Ministry from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' [*Renewing the Vision*](#). But what do we offer our church after they graduate from high school? Why do we work so hard to develop a sense of faith among our community with small children, younger adolescents and adolescents, and then wish them luck as they walk out the door after receiving their diplomas? What opportunities of faith development do we provide for young adults¹ who have grown up in the Church? Fr. John Cusick and Katherine DeVries, former director and associate director, respectively, of the Young Adult Ministry Office in the Archdiocese of Chicago, write:

Learning more about spirituality, faith, and the Catholic tradition has become very important for young adults. As a matter of fact, in the hierarchy of expressed needs, learning more about their faith ranks right behind concerns about relationships. This spiritual hunger is reflected in both religious and secular data revealing that this generation of young adults is in fact a spiritually hungry one. Consequently, much of our work now focuses on formulating catechetical programs designed to help young adults explore their faith and feed that spiritual hunger. (153)

To emphasize Cusick and DeVries' words, I urge you to not leave our young adults behind, and work towards feeding them something other than instant ramen noodles.

In this paper, I will suggest an approach to reach young adults who embraced their faith in high school, but now feel lost, abandoned and "weird" post-graduation. This vision intends to help answer the question: How can I, as a young adult, continue to express my Catholic faith beyond the doors of my Catholic high school campus?

¹ The Bishops define a young adult as "people in their late teens, twenties, and thirties; single, married, divorced, or widowed; and with or without children." (USCCB 7)

In order to accommodate young adults across the country, this vision is solely based in the virtual world – a blog² series. Blog posts can be shared through various social media platforms, and can also provide a discussion forum for young adults to connect on similar views or perhaps even spark a healthy debate. The mission of this vision is to provide a new way in approaching young adults to help them carry out their baptismal calling, which Edward Hahnenberg describes as a “call to discipleship” (114). If we begin by reaching out to them where they’re at – the Internet – then we can work towards encouraging participation in face-to-face social interactions (depending on their geographical locations). As Cusick and Devries argue:

If we are serious about the church’s mission of evangelization and catechesis, and if we and some carefully chosen others accept the challenge of making our own young adults the target group of our efforts, then we must go at it a different way. Instead of being paralyzed by the situation that exists, we can use it as a springboard to *what can be*.” (8)

So *what can be*? Blogs. And, to model my proposed suggestion, you may notice that this entire paper is written in blog format, where each section represents a new blog post.

Until next time... Peace.

Sons and Daughters of the Light: An Origin Story

We cannot discuss young adult ministry without incorporating the initial visions of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (or whom I like to refer to as “The Bishops”). In 1996, The Bishops released a document, [*Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults*](#). This document is discussed in five parts: 1) the identity of young adults, 2) how they are being called, 3) four goals to accomplish while creating a plan for ministry with young adults, 4) key players to help support this plan, and 5) how to implement this plan. While *Sons and Daughters of the Light* is still relevant today, it is almost 20 years old. American society has dramatically changed as technology has changed. If The Bishops were to

² According to [Merriam-Webster](#), a blog is “a Web site that contains online personal reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer.”

add an addendum to this document, it would be necessary for them to include the use of technology as a way to reach young adults.

As part of their research, which initially began in 1993, The Bishops interviewed young adults to see what they were looking for when it came to their faith:

“Although [young adults] desire a deeper spiritual life, this attitude and other influences from contemporary society push them to question and doubt what has been part of their lives. The Church needs to respond to this doubting and questioning by encouraging a dialogue that welcomes challenges from the young adult to the Church and from the Church to the young adult, so that each may grow in discipleship.” (USCCB 13)

If we want young adults to grow in discipleship, we have to give them a forum for dialogue; a forum that is easily accessible in this day and age. Technology and use of the Internet are now cultural norms. In order to reach our young adults, we must embrace these norms. Helen Cameron, a British theologian, explains “Some churches are intentionally adopting cultural forms that they feel enable them to enculturate the gospel in a way that makes it easier to read in a post-Christian and plural society” (37). Instead of “some churches,” let’s work towards *all* churches.

In order to accomplish this goal, we have to begin with our origin story, but then not be afraid to adapt it. As society changes, our response must change. So where do we go from here? Until next time... Peace.

Why the Need?

Devout parents are concerned for their newly “freed” children. I recently had a conversation with a mother of a recent high school graduate, attending an out-of-state college.

Me: *“How’s Arizona treating your older son?”*

Mother: *“Pray for him. He told me recently that he stopped going to church. He has too many things going on, and his weekends are busy. I don’t understand; he was so active in his parish youth ministry. Why would he give up now?”*

Me: *“Unfortunately, this happens to a lot of faithful students who go away to school. He’s just trying to adjust.”*

These conversations are tough to have. I would like to ensure that he would find his way again, and make his faith a priority. But I cannot make that promise. Young adults often get lost in a world of new experiences. New routines, classes, workloads, and social lives take priority over faith life. Their Thursday evenings once consisted of youth ministry nights, yet now consist of English 101, the closing shift at Starbucks, or the beginning of a long weekend (because Friday classes are overrated). And since they moved up north to attend school, they couldn't help with their former youth ministry program even if they wanted to. Sunday mornings are spent sleeping in and Sunday nights turn into homework cram sessions. It's easy to justify "busy-ness" as a valid excuse. If they do not surround themselves with peers who are also trying to make room for faith practices, then what (or who) is their motivation? If faithful young adults do not have faithful friends, then their faithfulness is no longer a priority. But if one is attending a new school or job, or perhaps relocated to a new city, how can she or he find and make friends with faithful people? "College years can be wonderful but difficult years. They are times of decision making, the testing of values, and dealing with family expectations. These are the years when kids become adults, actions become habits (some of which are virtues), and mistakes lead to insights" (Cusick & DeVries 76). So why is there a need to reach out to our young adults? Because we are creating lonely, yet busy non-practicing Catholics.

Connecting these teens with this blog series *prior* to transition, may give them a resource and a network to latch on to so they don't feel lost or abandoned in the transition process. They are transitioning into a world that introduces doubts and the questioning of their beliefs. The

Bishops write:

Some [young adults] experience this searching as a quiet inner questioning, a thoughtful reexamination of traditional beliefs. Others accomplish this by learning more about their faith or by participating in prayer groups and small communities. For still others, this searching can lead to a functional atheism, a rejection of organized religion, or a

distancing from activities and worship. This questioning should be seen as a path that leads to possible future faith development. (USCCB 14)

Furthermore, young adults would rather search out “the meaning of life” and other major questions on their own. They may settle on their Google research, or they may try to search deeper into the Web. Whatever they choose, they are searching on their own. [Pew Research](#) claims that “[millennials³] are more likely to have a “do-it-yourself” attitude toward religion” (Masci). And the best and easiest way to find “do-it-yourself” research is on the internet, perfectly organized on their Pinterest board.

While they are Google searching “the Truth,” let’s be sure to fall within the first page of the search results. Let’s get into the trenches, and start writing!

Until next time... Peace.

How To... Write for This Audience

While writing your blogs, you will need to make sure that they reach your particular audience. You must recognize (and accept) how wide your audience actually is. Thirty-five year-old young adults will not be interested in *all* the same topics as 19 year-old young adults. And vice versa. Same goes with those who are married versus not married; children versus no children. A post reviewing “Theology on Tap” bar locations will not appeal to your under 21 crowd. A post about “How to Find Your Soulmate” will not excite the newlywed couple. I could give several more examples, but you probably get the point. You will either need to narrow down your blog series to a very specific young adult audience, or provide a variety for all combinations of audiences.

³ People who have reached adulthood around and after the year 2000 are classified as “millennials.” Therefore, current young adults are millennials. I will interchange “young adults” and “millennials” throughout the rest of this paper.

Regardless of your audience, there are four components to your blog series that will resonate with all of your young adult readers: 1) broad and relatable topics, 2) authenticity, 3) length, and 4) format.

1. Topics to Focus On

In order to use this forum as a way to catechize young adults, blog posts must be intentional and not just a stream of thoughts. However, they also have to be relatable and not merely consisting of academic prose. According to The Bishops, “Young adults understand both the message of faith and the traditions of the Church when these are communicated through words, symbols, and activities that relate to life experiences” (USCCB 26). Therefore, catechesis should be integrated with topics that touch the everyday lives of these young adults. Blog posts may include, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- Finding friends with similar values and beliefs
- Balancing school/work/social life with spiritual life
- Self-love and self-worth
- Doubting your faith
- Ways to cultivate a spiritual life

Blog posts can also be inspired by questions or situations that your readers share in the comments section of the blog. Let your followers guide the conversation, and use future blog posts to address questions and concerns that you see within the comments and feedback from your followers. The Bishops concluded that:

“Many young adults spoke of their desire for effective adult religious education to help them make good moral decisions. They said that they need a forum not only where misgivings and doubts can be expressed freely but also where the teachings of the Church can be clearly articulated in response... Many young adults told us that what is most convincing is an open but well-reasoned discussion, informed and fortified by the minister’s confidence in the wisdom of the Church.” (USCCB 29)

Blog posts spark the discussions, and comments create the forum for dialogue among your readers. The author (aka the minister) will act as the official voice of your parish or diocese, answering questions, and mediating the discussions in the comments section.

2. *The “I” in Blog*

Blogs are personal and personable. The reader wants a peek into your life, but also wants to be a part of it. Do not be afraid to use “I” when writing your blogs. Including personal stories (at your discretion, of course) of both triumphs and defeats brings empathy to your reader. You want to bring out the emotions in your readers, so that they transcend into your writing. They walk in falling in love with the princess character and walk out *being* the princess (princes too).

Forbes Magazine published an online article, “[10 New Findings About the Millennial Consumer](#),” to help businesses better understand their young adult consumers. One of their findings includes the “value of authenticity” in a company⁴:

43% of millennials rank authenticity over content when consuming news. They first have to trust a company or news site before they even bother reading the content that they produce. Blogs are meant to be authentic and many of them are run by a single individual. Millennials connect best with people over logos. (Schwabel)

This is also true with Catholic young adults searching for a faith community. “The Catholic Church” is very ominous and difficult to relate to. You might as well just post PDF sections of the *Catechism* and call it a day. However, if a young adult is reading a blog written by a real person (selfie included), then there is a greater chance that they will feel more comfortable because of the authenticity factor. When you use “I” in your blogs, you are inviting your reader to take over the story. If you do this, then there is greater potential that you will succeed in inspiring your readers’ call to discipleship through your blog post catechesis.

⁴ One could argue that the Catholic Church is not a business, and therefore disregarding this point; however, if we are to reach millennials, we must accept that their “search for the Truth” falls within the same search mode for finding the perfect brunch spot.

3. *Get to the Point*

Young adults spend a great amount of time browsing the Internet – waiting in line at a cash register, waiting for a friend to arrive at a coffee shop, waiting for the Uber driver, waiting to fall asleep at night, or waiting to get out of bed in the morning. And because we do not like to be alone for longer than 15 seconds (*I know* I’m not the only one who feels this way), we turn to our cellular devices for easy Internet access. So let’s meet them where they’re at, and give them something fruitful to read while they’re waiting. Catechizing does not need to take place in a classroom or church hall, or even in person. Besides, most learning takes place online these days. However, we have to realize that if we want to teach while these young adults are “waiting,” then it needs to be quick and concise. Keep all blog posts to a reasonably short length.

4. *How Does My Blog Look?*

We may try to teach that “looks aren’t everything,” but this motto does not apply to blogs. The look of your blog must be aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Short paragraphs, numbered lists, and images, such as photos, GIFs⁵, charts, and infographics, are all great ways to improve the “look” of your blog. This “look” will allow young adults to skim through an article to see if it’s worth reading in its entirety. They will ask themselves: *Is reading this blog worth my time?* I find myself leaning more towards articles titled “3 Ways to...” or “5 Reasons Why You Shouldn’t...” I know immediately that it will not take long to read these articles, and there’s a greater chance that my attention will be held all the way through. Plus, I love lists. Furthermore, adding images captures the mind of the reader, and instantly expresses a deeper meaning than simple prose.

⁵ According to [Merriam-Webster](#), a GIF (graphic interchange format) is “a computer file format for the compression and storage of digital video images.”

We can see here that time is valuable, and if one is not hooked by a catchy title, if the blog does not look organized, succinct, and straight to the point, then it is not “worth it.”

All in all, it is important to be intentional when writing a blog for your young adult audience.

Don’t skip the must-haves, don’t forget who your audience is, and don’t forget to take the time to make it worth theirs.

Until next time... Peace.

My Closing Argument

We have to meet young adults where they’re at, and currently that location is online. Renewing The Bishops’ young adult vision by adding a digital component is a way to catechize our young adults, and renew their call to discipleship. Providing a forum for discussion and a connection with one another, no matter their location, is a way to put this vision into action. Creating a blog series, including the four components discussed in this paper – broad and relatable topics, authenticity, length, and format – is the action that you are looking for.

I am pulling from my experience as a young adult Catholic high school campus minister. I imagine that youth ministers in parishes often deal with the similar challenge of where to send their newly minted young adults after graduation. Many will invite them to return as young adult leaders in their youth ministries, but that is not an effective way to help these young adults grow in their own faith development. The Bishops warn us: “However the local Church is organized, remember that ministry with young adults is separate and distinct from adolescent ministry and is primarily a ministry to and with adults” (USCCB 48). Young adults can be a great asset to a youth ministry program, as they are more likely to be able to relate to young people based on the proximity of their age; however, it cannot be a replacement for their ministry.

I know from personal and professional experience that we, as a Church, are not providing for our young adults; at least not in a way that relates directly to them. It's time that we take the time to change this. Focusing on young adult ministry and catering to the needs of this underappreciated population of the Catholic Church is crucial to the future of our Church. Instead of spending all of our time discussing blue sky possibilities, how can we spend our time effectively working towards the implementation of this model of catechesis? What can we do to move from a Church of ideas to a Church of action?

Until next time... Peace.

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<<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/08/qa-why-millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans/>>.

Schawbel, Dan. “10 New Findings About the Millennial Consumer.” *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 20 Jan. 2015. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.

<<http://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2015/01/20/10-new-findings-about-the-millennial-consumer/#111d24b328a8>>.

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United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults*. Washington, D.C.: USCCB. 1996. Print.

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Cameron, Helen. *Resourcing Mission: Practical Theology for Changing Churches*. London: SCM Press. 2010. Print.

Cameron is a British theologian, studying and researching local churches in England. In her book, she focuses on bringing practical theology to the local churches in her area. Cameron's book provides practical ways to meet the challenges that churches face in today's changing world. She urges her readers to look at local churches with new eyes, new structures, and new ways of reaching their worshipping communities. While she does not specifically talk about the American Church, her ideas and practices are certainly applicable to American churches.

Cusick, John C. and Katherine F. DeVries. *The Basic Guide to Young Adult Ministry*. New York: Orbis Books. 2001. Print.

Cusick and DeVries, at the publication of this book, were the Director and Associate Director of the Young Adult Ministry Office for the Archdiocese of Chicago. After reading the USCCB's *Sons & Daughters of the Light*, Cusick and DeVries put the Bishop's document into practice. After a few years of success, they wrote this book to encourage and help other dioceses and parishes implement young adult ministry. They discuss the needs of young adults in the Church, and explain strategies of successfully meeting these needs. While they start at the parish level, they also encourage support at the diocesan level.

Hahnenberg, Edward P. *Ministries: A Relational Approach*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company. 2003. Print.

Hahnenberg's book tackles the changes that churches are going through, and how to approach these changes in a different way. He discusses the importance of relationship in ministry, especially in this time of transition and growth. Hahnenberg's book encourages ministry leaders, both clergy and laity, to work together in leadership and community to create a new theology of ministry.

Masci, David. "Q&A: Why Millennials Are Less Religious than Older Americans." *Pew Research Center*. Pew Research Center, 8 Jan. 2016. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/08/qa-why-millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans/>.

In this article, Masci interviews Michael Hout, a sociology professor at New York University, to see if they can figure out why Millennials are less religious than older adults. Masci and Hout attempt to answer questions of "why?" and continue the discussion of the fate of the Church in the future.

Schawbel, Dan. "10 New Findings About the Millennial Consumer." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 20 Jan. 2015. Web. 29 Feb. 2016.

<<http://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2015/01/20/10-new-findings-about-the-millennial-consumer/#111d24b328a8>>.

In this article, Schawbel focuses on the millennial consumer, including their wants and needs, so that businesses who are marketing to millennials better understand this demographic, and how they can properly reach them.

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<<http://www.usccb.org/about/laity-marriage-family-life-and-youth/young-adults/renewing-the-vision.cfm>>.

In 1976, the USCCB issued a *Vision for Youth Ministry* among parishes and schools. They decided to take a look at the vision and make some changes that would better relate to the changing times. In 1997, they published *Renewing the Vision* to create a more effective way of implementing youth ministry in their parishes and schools.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults*. Washington, D.C.: USCCB. 1996. Print.

USCCB recognized that they were not reaching young adults in the way that they wanted to. They created this pastoral plan to help parishes, universities, dioceses, and organizations better understand young adults, to encourage these leaders to reach goals, and to implement programs that would meet the needs of those young adults.

About the Author

Sarah Swisher is a Catholic high school campus minister, teacher, theologian, blogger, and millennial. She received her Bachelor's degree in Theological Studies in 2009, and her Master's degree in Pastoral Theology in 2013, both from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. She spent the last 10 years working in youth ministry. She has worked and volunteered in a number of parish youth ministry programs, she has been involved with youth leadership retreats, and she has been a member of Youth Day teams, for both the regional and Archdiocesan levels. Sarah has also been a part of social media development teams for youth conferences in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Although most of her ministry experience took place in youth ministry, she has struggled with her own faith development throughout this time, and has wondered why the Church is not meeting the needs of her and her peers (hence, the direction of this paper). She currently works at St. Bonaventure High School in Ventura, California as Director of Campus Ministry and Christian Service. In her free time, you won't be able to find her as she is probably traveling, hiking, or writing for her blog, Confessions of a Paleo Girl.