

Youth Pastoral Ministry and Youth Evangelisation

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I am truly delighted to reflect on the theme “Youth Pastoral Ministry and Youth Evangelisation” in the context of Asia. This reflection becomes especially relevant this year as the Church celebrates the Silver Jubilee of the First World Youth Day. This year, the UN also celebrates the 25th Anniversary of the Youth Year. Moreover, the UN has declared the period between 2010 Aug 12th and 2011 Aug 11th as the International Year of Youth with the theme “Dialogue and Mutual Understanding”.

WHO ARE YOUTH?

- The United Nations, for statistical purposes, defines youth as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States.
- The United Nations General Assembly defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years.
- The World Bank uses this term with reference to people between 15 and 25.
- The Commonwealth Youth Programme refers to young people as youngsters aged between 15 and 29.
- Most of the Bishops’ conferences refer to youth as youngsters starting from 18 to the age of 30-35.

Beyond all these definitions, youth are the most dynamic section of any society and the most fascinating stage of life. When we think of youth, we think of all that is beautiful in life such as fashion, sports, arts, media, new technologies, fun, adventure, relationships, idealism, creativity and great dreams. It is thus imperative that youth be seen not just as an age, but a state of mind and an attitude.

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WHY FOCUS ON YOUTH?

- There are three billion people aged under twenty-five on this planet. Sixty one percent of them live in Asia. That is, 57% of the world's population live in Asia and 47% of Asia's population are under 25 years of age. In other words, 1/4th of the world's population is under 25 and live in Asia (Source: US Census Bureau).

- Youth is the most generous time and so targeted by all.

- If approached well, this is the best time in a person's life to be moulded - for good or for bad.

- Youth are the best agents of change. They hold the key to the lifestyle of the world.

- It is a time of never ending newness and learning, about themselves and the world around.

- They possess a spontaneous zeal for values like love, unity, peace and justice.

- They are the real 'today' and 'tomorrow'. Our future leaders - political and religious, priests and laity, are all there among them.

- Young people in Asia have long been overlooked, very misunderstood and literally a world away from the supposed hot beds of youth culture in the United States and Europe. In reality, young people in Asia are a leading light for understanding youth across the world.

THE WORLD OF YOUTH TODAY

“Multi-tasking”; “thirty-six hour day”; “5-minute attention span”... there are so many such expressions that describe the youth of today.

In diverse avenues the contemporary world attributes great significance to youth, their life and their contributions to society. In our technology driven world, children or youth mostly have the final say where problem solving, gadget buying and decision-making are concerned. Youth and their trends are of great significance to the society, to the business sector, to religion and politics. Major industries observe youth trends to decide on what to manufacture, while marketing organizations constantly evolve new styles in youth marketing. Consequently, research on youth trends and perspectives has assumed great significance today.

TODAY'S YOUTH - A CLOSER LOOK

- Youth are immersed in TODAY: They live in a practical world of life and its problems, work and difficulties.

- Intense experience: Whether it is sadness or joy, love or hatred, they are deeply affected by it, very often vacillating from one to the other.

- The world of friendship is everything to them.

- One of the key words in the youth world is 'Networking' – they cannot survive without being connected to one another – they want to be equipped to reach others 24/7 – and they need to be reached too.

- Many of them are in the grip of the mesmerising world of the media and technologies.

- A culture of death is increasing among the youth today.

- A spiritual search is also on the rise.

- Another interesting development is the growth of localisation in the youth culture, especially in Asia. There is a growing trend against Westernisation / Globalisation. It is an established fact that premium music channels like MTV Asia feature 80% local music and only 20% imported music.

- Youth are still trying to make sense of a complex, multi-level world and are often very confused.

The whole of society is in a cauldron of rapid change. And the group that is melted and moulded the most in this transforming pressure is the young generation. In former times there were better props in the family, society and the Church to assist the youth to find their bearings and get a foothold in this most confusing stage of life. But today, more than ever, society is at a loss to provide relevant support and guidance to the growing generation of the day.

At this critical juncture, the Church is called to draw close to this complex reality and share Jesus with them.

KEY YOUTH INFLUENCES

“Love what the young love and they will love what you love” – Don Bosco

Youth do not want change, they are the change. If you want to see youth, go to the cinemas, a music show, a cricket match or a political meeting. In a rapidly changing world they ride the wave; they enjoy its goodies and are most deeply affected by it. They want to be talked with, not talked to. Today’s youth are interested in fame, entrepreneurship; they want to become rich, be independent and be someone who can make a difference. Here are a few things around them that modern youth are interested in:

a. *Friendship*

Ask any young person. You will find that what he or she wants most is love and friendship. And they will do anything, not only to spend time with friends but if possible, to do whatever friends do; be it in the way of dressing, ragging, joining a gang, helping the poor or getting together and praying. For good or for bad they want to enjoy and ‘experience every moment’.

Young men and women significantly differ in their attitude to having buddies and how they have fun. "Boys' relationships tend to be more diffused. They hang out as a group, and the relationships are much more fluid... Girls spend a lot of time on their phones, in close, tight-knit social relationships".¹ Girls easily get involved in very intimate conversations and exchange secrets that boys would never reveal. And studies reveal that girls are twice as likely as boys to attempt suicide if they have few friends and are isolated from their peers.

And when young men and young women get together they easily get into deeper relationships. Asian statistics are not easy to come by, but that of the developed world, though much higher in degree, is often an indication of what is in store. In the US, one-quarter of 15 year old females and less than 30% of 15 year old males have had sex, compared with 66% of 18 year old females and 68% of 18 year old males. Nearly one million young women under 20 years become pregnant each year. That means close to 2800

¹ Cf. the study “Friendship more Vital to Teen Girls”, <
<http://68.71.208.15/Technology/story?id=99590&page=2>>

teens get pregnant each day.² One indication of sexual practices in India could be the estimate of people living with HIV – between 2.4 to 3.2 million in 2007.³

b. Youth and the Media

Youth is all about wanting to explore, dream and discover. More than a thousand films were produced last year in India alone, more than 20 hours of videos are uploaded to YouTube every minute and hundreds of thousands of video clips daily, millions are spent on cricket matches, new jobs are coming to the country and all these are transforming the lives of our youth.

I. Music

Music is something that an average young person is crazy about. Most of them, that is, 93% of Asian youth⁴ are passionate about music; 85% of the Asian youth like music; 54% of Asian youth ‘love’ music; 1% hate music. 28% of Asian youth “would listen to music every minute of the day if [they] could”.

How they listen: 66% are listening to MORE music now that it’s digital. In India 52% bought CDs from a store; 22% paid to download music; 23% didn’t pay to download.

Music Videos (Asia): 86% watch on TV; 67% on computer; 38% on mobile. In India 42% downloaded music to the phone “last month”. For 17%, the phone is “my main music player” in Asia.

II. Internet

There are 1.8 billion net users⁵ in the world (25.6% of total population); 43% of these net users are in Asia. In India there are 81 million Internet users and the number is fast increasing. And two thirds of them are youth.

A growing number of youth and children are on the Internet and they are crazy about it. But why do they want to be there? “There are three aspects of what the youth like to do (on the Internet). Voyeurism – they like to know what is happening, especially in other

² Cf. statistics on Teens, < <http://www.soundvision.com/Info/teens/stat.asp>>

³ Cf. UNICEF – India statistics, < http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/india_statistics.html>

⁴ Cf. third Annual Music Matters Survey, source: MTV Music Matters Research 2008 (TNS).

⁵ Cf. Internet Usage in Asia. Internet World Stats, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, 2 Jan 2010.

people's lives. They want fame – the desire to be famous. Be God-like – they want to be in control”.⁶

Social Network Sites: Today two thirds of those on the Internet are now on social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, etc.) If you ask teenagers about the number of friends they have, most of them will mention the number in hundreds and they surely mean their friends on Facebook or Orkut. Social networking will play the most important role in the online habits of young people in the coming years.

III. Mobile Phones

India is currently the second largest mobile market in the world after China. In November 2009 there were 543 million⁷ telephone subscribers (506 wireless and 37 wireline) and according to the latest statistics, more than 50% of the population use a mobile phone.⁸ 10 – 12 million mobile subscribers are added monthly and its major user base, clearly consists of youth.

With new, mind boggling features appearing in each new generation of handsets and with the increase in the number of service providers, mobile phones have become the greatest friend of any youth. Other than the facility for phone calls, text messaging, browsing, music player, scheduler, alarm, torch, calculator, camera and stopwatch are just some of the numerous facilities available on a regular mobile handset. As of now, mobile phones are perhaps an indication of the conveniences and lifestyle of the generations to come, when futuristic facilities will be provided at zero cost to everyone.

c. Youth and Politics

There have been complaints that the modern youth are not interested in politics and that in India, politics is full of 'oldies'. But in Asia where the majority of the population is young and has a decisive vote to cast, the political parties are eager to relate to youth and also give some space for youth to contest. A World Bank survey says that the percentage of

⁶ Cf. Prakash Bagri, Director – Marketing, Intel, www.exchange4media.com/e4m/news/printpage.asp?section_id=3&news_id=338727&tag=28844

⁷ Cf. Telecom Regulatory Authority of India. Dec 2009 <<http://www.trai.gov.in/WriteReadData/trai/upload/PressReleases/712/pr23dec09no79.pdf>>

⁸ Cf. the list of Countries by number of mobile phones in use. Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_number_of_mobile_phones_in_use>

youth (the 18-24 age group) 'very' or 'rather' interested in politics in India rose from around 35 per cent in 1990 to around 50 per cent in 2000.⁹ The study also indicates that the youth in poorer nations are more interested in politics compared to youth in richer nations.

a) Youth and Violent Extremism

Is violent extremism a threat to this continent? And what could be the role of the youth in violence and extremism?

Violent extremism or terrorism is the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion. Terrorism has been described variously as both a tactic and strategy; a crime and a holy duty; a justified reaction to oppression and an inexcusable abomination. But one thing is clear. It is often young people and not rarely, well educated youth who take leadership to mastermind and also carry out these heinous acts of technical prowess.

It is good to ask why well-educated engineers, doctors and computer specialists are drawn to these deviant groups.¹⁰ It is often pointed out that modern education, more so technical education, is devoid of humanitarian values. Add to this the ruthless competition in education coupled with a mad consumerist rush for profit and it becomes the perfect recipe to lead young minds into radical responses.

A serious dearth of education in right attitudes and values at all levels has amply contributed to the development of these radical attitudes. Youth emerging from an authoritarian culture and those who feel exploited and persecuted are easily swayed by these campaigns of hatred and readily enrol for “acts of bravery”.

b) Youth and Sports

“To succeed...You need to find something to hold on to, something to motivate you, something to inspire you” - Tony Dorsett (American footballer)

Young women like social networks, while young men like sports, and research says this is true of websites as well as magazines.¹¹ Parents and teachers drive them away, but

⁹ Cf. “More Indian Youth Interested in Politics” <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_more-indian-youth-interested-in-politics_1053438>

¹⁰ Cf. Engineer, Asghar Ali. Terrorism and Educated Youth. <http://www.indianmuslims.info/articles/asghar_ali_engineer/terrorism_and_educated_youth.html>

¹¹ Cf. “Youth Study: Women Like Social Networks, Men Like Sports Sites”,

youth are crazy about sports. Whether it be cricket, soccer, adventure sports or field games, most of the youth have their minds out there in the playground.

Unfortunately the sports field is set apart for professionals and others are discouraged from wasting time on it. One of the greatest frustrations that youth, especially young men, suffer is their inability to involve in physical exercise of any kind, especially in the game field. This could also be a reason for the dangerously growing trend of general lethargy, a variety of deviant habits and Internet or other addictions among a large number of young males in our country.

In recent times there has been a growing awareness of the benefits, not only of physical exercise, but also of all kinds of sports, especially for youth¹². It is well accepted that recreational sports and exercise can have a positive benefit psychologically. Brisk walking, biking or swimming can result in changes in the chemical balance of our mind, which induce positive emotions and have proven to be an effective therapy for mild to moderate depression, as or more effective than medication. Additionally, team sports can help one to not feel isolated, which can be one factor in many mental health difficulties and disorders. In terms of Positive Psychology, recreational sports can be a healthy part of life and contribute to a positive viewpoint, as well as be a preventive measure in terms of psychological fortitude.

THE CHURCH IN DIALOGUE WITH “TODAY”

Young people exert a very important influence in modern society. The circumstances of their life, their habits of thought, their relations with their families, have been completely transformed . . . The growth of their social importance demands from them a corresponding apostolic activity; and indeed their natural character inclines them in this direction.¹³

Concerning our approach to youth there are a couple of fallacies or at least half-truths quite prevalent among the Church leadership.

<http://www.marketingvox.com/youth_study_women_like_social_networks_men_like_sports_sites-022170/>

¹² Cf. “Sport Psychology”, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sport_psychology>

¹³ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 12.

• Youth are unspiritual: They like only games and fun. They are driven by media, entertainment and the search for pleasure. The only way to get them and keep them with us is to have competitions and fun sessions.

• Youth can never be disciplined, steady and dependable. They are out to disrupt any system that is out there.

The saddest thing is that these statements are partly true for youth in general, but at the same time unbelievably false when we get close to them. Youth is a complex reality, not only for the elders but even for youth themselves. From a distance they might seem like troublemakers, but when one draws near to them and shares Christ with them they become the most lovable and noble friends.

Today the Church needs to search for and rediscover the world of young people, afresh. It is indeed a fast changing world and hence continuous effort for greater understanding will keep the Church young and relevant. They form a complex reality, ranging from highly urbanised and westernised to the most backward and rural, with a diverse spectrum of economic and social conditions in between. Being youth is a great joy and a burden. There is a common world that they share. Understanding and drawing near to them is the first step in the Church's mission concerning youth.

Where are these Young People?

Meeting young men and women, individually and in groups and being present to them marks the beginning of an urgent mission of the Church today. But where can we find them, so that we can talk to them about Jesus and they in turn can talk to their friends?

➤ In our villages and cities – perhaps a parish setting is an easier way to reach them.

➤ Education – school and campus ministries are very effective tools here.

➤ Professionals/workers – peer group evangelism is the need of the hour.

➤ Leadership circles (political, social) – relating to them at this level is highly fruitful.

➤ Migrants/in hostels – their need to belong is best met by friends in Christ.

➤ The under privileged/tribals – they are waiting for the caring touch of Jesus.

Ecclesia in Asia puts it this way:

The Church lives and fulfils her mission in the actual circumstances of time and place. A critical awareness of the diverse and complex realities of Asia is essential if the People of God on the continent are to respond to God's will for them in the new evangelisation.¹⁴ Meeting youth where they are, using their "language" and responding to their aspirations will help them come to Jesus and begin a new life with Him.

"This "being Asian" is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own Tradition and to the Asian soul".¹⁵

GUIDING THE YOUTH

Helping youth to wade through the mixed fare of modern attractions, affiliations and pitfalls is a herculean task for the country, community and the Church. It throws up innumerable questions on how to ensure the safe enjoyment that they ask for while escorting them on avenues of development and at the same time, imparting formation for leadership.

The contemporary youth world and related issues do not just challenge the socially conscious, but disturb the sleep of most of the teachers, parents, caring elders, community leaders and socio-economic planners. Different communities, schools and service groups are brainstorming for and trying their hands on ways to tackle the most urgent need of every society, called youth care. A number of approaches, both old and new, have been tried out. And here is a sampling of the work of a secular agency in youth care:¹⁶

1) Befriending - Just being a friend to troubled youths, 2) Counselling - Developing self-awareness, providing support, 3) Life Skills Group Work - Imparting life skills such as effective communication, conflict resolution and decision making, 4) Service Learning - Learn as one serves the community, 5) Project Serve - Short attachment with YGOS, 6) Mentoring - Coaching, 'walking' with a youth over an extended period of time, 7) Family Mediation - Playing peacemaker, 8) Parenting Talks - Sharing understanding of youths with

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 5& 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 6.

¹⁶ Cf. Our Mission. Youth Guidance. <<http://youthguidance.org.sg/front.htm>>

parents of teenagers, 9) Volunteer Training - Equipping volunteers with necessary knowledge and skills in helping youths-at-risk and their families, 10) Outdoor Adventure - Such as kayaking, rock climbing, mountain biking, hiking etc., 11) Sports/Recreational Activities - Such as soccer, basketball, floor ball, BBQS, fishing etc., 12) Camps - Local and Overseas, 13) Overseas Community Service - Seeking to understand foreign cultures and serving underprivileged communities, etc.

But for us in the Church the issue of mentoring youth is much more pressing as it is integral to the Church's mission and its very existence. The words of the venerable youth pastor of happy memory, Pope John Paul II crystallises the sentiments of the Mother Church:

“In our pastoral care we ask ourselves: How are we to reveal Jesus Christ, God made man, to this multitude of children and young people, reveal him not just in the fascination of a first fleeting encounter but through an acquaintance, growing deeper and clearer daily, with him, his message, the plan of God that he has revealed, the call he addresses to each person, and the Kingdom that he wishes to establish in this world with the “little flock” of those who believe in him, a Kingdom that will be complete only in eternity? How are we to enable them to know the meaning, the import, the fundamental requirements, the law of love, the promises and the hopes of this Kingdom?”¹⁷ (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 35)

YOUTH AND THE CHURCH

The Church of all generations has had a special appreciation and preference for youth, after the life example and mind of its youthful Master. As Pope John Paul II wrote in the International Youth Year, “The Church looks to the young; or rather, the Church in a special way sees herself in the young – in you as a group and in each of you as individuals”.¹⁸

The Church has much to give and receive from youth. A conscious effort to walk with youth and dialogue with this difficult reality will surely transform the heart and face of the Church. Making the Church and its institutions more youth-friendly will definitely put them

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, no. 35.

¹⁸ IDEM, Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici*, 15.

more in touch with the ‘signs of the times’ and hence ready for dialogue with the diverse cultures and pressing issues around.

“The Church has so much to talk about with youth, and youth have so much to share with the Church. This mutual dialogue, by taking place with great cordiality, clarity and courage, will provide a favourable setting for the meeting and exchange between generations, and will be a source of richness and youthfulness for the Church and civil society”.¹⁹ (*Christifidelis Laici*, 46)

Furthermore, if there is a clear focus and preparedness at different levels of the Church for imparting missionary formation to youth, the Church as a whole will come alive with greater fervour and spontaneity. A youth friendly bishop or priest will be extremely successful as a pastor and a youth friendly parish or religious congregation will be quite alive and contemporary.

CATHOLIC YOUTH MINISTRY

In the wider society youth guidance has always been the special prerogative of the Church and she has been doing this very effectively over the years. With this mission in mind the Church over the centuries developed a comprehensive formation system called education. In recent times when the wider society has taken over the system of education, the Church has developed other specialised tools and approaches to youth care with a wider name, youth ministry.

How can we define youth ministry? “Youth ministry is the response of the Christian community to the needs of young people and the sharing of the unique gifts of youth with the larger community”.²⁰ Then again, youth ministry, to address the complex reality of youth issues, has to be comprehensive and it involves different dimensions. “Youth Ministry is TO youth when the Christian community exercises its pastoral role in meeting young people’s needs. [...] Youth ministry is WITH youth because young people share with adults a common responsibility to carry out the Church’s mission. [...] Youth ministry is BY youth

¹⁹ IDEM, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, no. 46.

²⁰ UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE, *Renewing the vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, 1997, p1.

when young people exercise their own ministry to others, particularly to their peers. [...] Youth ministry is FOR youth in that adult youth ministers attempt to interpret the needs of youth and act as advocates in articulating youth's legitimate concerns to the wider community".²¹

The Challenge of a youth ministry is this: How can we create a SAFE PLACE where young people can HEAR others tell their (life) stories, until they find the COURAGE to tell their own story and, in this context, DISCOVER God's salvation story? In reality most of the youth movements work with two different types of people: the first category is that of youth who are baptised, but not evangelised or re-evangelised; the second category has those who are neither baptised nor evangelised. We need to help them to have a personal encounter with the Living Christ and they need to be sustained, deepened, and put into mission. In other words, the four dimensions of a youth ministry are, to help a person to have a personal God-experience, to undergo Formation to become a Disciple and an Apostle, to grow as a part of a Community, and to be sent on Mission to produce fruits.

An earlier document by the US Bishops enlists eight components of comprehensive youth ministry. They are: I) Catechesis, II) Prayer & Worship, III) Community Life, IV) Pastoral Care, V) Justice & Service, VI) Leadership development, VII) Advocacy, and VIII) Evangelisation.

I) Catechesis: Deepening the faith of young people through teaching and reflection. Faith formation for youth has to be much more than Sunday classes. Peer group, life examples and media are perhaps the best vehicles of catechesis for youth.

II) Prayer and Worship: Helping youth to develop an individual prayer life, experience a variety of communal prayers, and involving youth in the sacramental life of the Church are integral to youth ministry. Giving youth a taste of the beauty of communication with the Divine is the best equipping we can give to help them live through the challenges of the contemporary world.

III) Community Life: Friendship is the best thing that youth like and they need a fellowship of peers who live their faith. Building community is not just between young people, but with their families and also engaging youth in the broader community.

²¹ IDEM, *A Vision of Youth Ministry*, Hunter Publishing, New Jersey 1986, pp. 6-7.

IV) Pastoral Care: Providing prevention programmes for youth and families, caring for those in crisis, and providing guidance during times of decisions and moral choices are the core of youth ministry. We are in need of trained elders as well as peer ministers to effectively carry on youth pastoral care at different levels.

V) Justice and Service: Youth are eager to stand for values and justice and a very important aspect of youth ministry is engaging young people in helping and serving other people, and understanding the Gospel call to justice through education and reflection.

VI) Leadership Development: Inviting, training, and supporting young people into leadership for youth ministry and for the broader community. Youth should not only be challenged to be the 'light of the world' but should be equipped to be. This formation to take up the responsibility to be leaders and decision makers in the neighbourhood, places of study and work and in the wider society should begin at the level of the parish.

VII) Evangelisation: Proclaiming the Good News and inviting youth to a relationship with Jesus Christ through ongoing witness. Mission, especially to bring Christ and His values and the Gospel to the modern world, should challenge and motivate youth. This should be the right goal of youth ministry.

VIII) Advocacy: Interpreting the needs of young people, standing up for young people, both as individuals and as a youth community. At all levels we need elders who truly understand youth, study their needs and speak up for them. Adults should be anxious to enter into friendly dialogue with the young, where, despite the difference in age, they could get to know one another and share with one another their own personal riches. It is by example first of all and, on occasion, by sound advice and practical help that adults should persuade the young to undertake the apostolate. The young, for their part, will treat their elders with respect and confidence; and though by nature inclined to favour what is new, they will have due esteem for praiseworthy tradition.

CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY YOUTH MINISTRY IN ASIA

“Listen to the words of youth, to some of the youth responses”:²²

"The Mass is monotonous. There is no life, no brightness or a sense of meaning and hope," the young man says. "The clergy speak of life and take extracts from the Gospel text, but they don't make an effort to explain its significance, nor get to know how we feel."

UCA News spoke recently with about 50... roughly eight in 10 said the Church does not show enough interest in youth. They grumbled that despite their requests for youth Masses and seminars, youth camps at which they can share their experiences and engage in outdoor activities, Bible study and counselling, they are not being heard.

Speaking on behalf of the youth group... one of the main problems is that young people don't understand much of what is being said from the pulpit... the Church needs to provide "a lot of space for youth," recognising that they represent the future of the Church.

"Unfortunately, the parish priests here have a tendency to encourage the passive and mediocre youth who fall in line with their way of thinking,"... "This is wrong, as it is the strong-spirited and pushy youth who should be given a chance to learn new activities and bring new vision."

"The Catholic Church has to stop making excuses and find a lot more time to keep youth in the Church family."

(Another girl)... pointed out that fundamentalist churches seem to take time to understand and help youth. "Why can't the Catholic Church do the same?" she asked.

A parish priest described the situation of youths being lured to fundamentalist churches as "sad but true," adding that he cannot blame them for seeking help and solace there. "This is where we have to put words into action and implement a new vision for the youth," he said. The Church has organised various training programs for priests to emphasise that youth are the future of the Church, he pointed out. But it is up to the priests, he maintained, "to allocate a lot of time towards the youth, otherwise they will continue to search for what they are missing in the Catholic Church."

It is often pointed out that in an average parish about 10% of youth participate actively in parish organisations or its pastoral life. Most of the Catholic Higher educational institutions are headed by priests or sisters, but the number of staff or students who approach them for pastoral care is almost zero. These youth care institutions should have been forums of Christian formation and youth leadership equipping. There is an urgent need

²² Cf. UCANEWS.COM, 20/4/2006

in the parish, in the school and at all levels of the Church to take youth seriously and to meet their needs and aspirations.

STRIKING THE RIGHT CHORD

The Master looked at the people of His times and found them, ‘harassed and helpless’ and like ‘sheep without a shepherd’. But surprisingly he saw them as ‘harvest’ that is plentiful (Cf. *Mt.* 9:36). The abundance and significance of youth in our region were very much in the mind of Bishops during their discussions in the Asian Synod. “The Synod singled out young people in particular as those for whom [the Church] should provide greater opportunity for fellowship and communion... by means of organised youth apostolates and youth clubs.”²³ The need of the hour is a fresh out look and some new strategies that flow out of it.

1) **Contemporary youth ministry focus:** In our country there is all round change and the youth reality is also changing. Hence the priorities of youth ministry also have to change accordingly. Some of urgent issues are:

I. Migration and movement – youth are travelling for education and jobs, they need attention.

II. Growing Media culture – that is their language, and we have to use it to be heard.

III. Professions and careers – careers have a culture, and faith has to be born there.

IV. Social concern & reach out – it is the need of the day and the best avenue for formation.

V. Preparing for public presence/secular leadership – In education, politics, management, technology, research, healthcare and in most of the ground-breaking fields our youth are there, but they need a Christian equipping.

2) **Youth Ministry is a Process:** Youth ministry is of supreme importance in the Church and hence the clergy, the institutions in the Church and the lay leaders should take this task seriously. This work is not for occasional visitors or arm-chair commentators. Youth Ministry has to grow over long periods of time and proceed step by step:

²³ JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 25.

I. Invitation - Use their language, meet where they are, catch their heroes and thus you begin to help them go through a process of conversion experience in their life.

II. Community: Growing as a part of a community – a place to belong and work together.

III. Formation: Meeting them where they are is the start; taking them where they should be is the challenge. We are very much in need of wholesome, ongoing formation style. Psychology, group dynamics, Word of God, teachings of the Church, etc. should be some of the significant elements of this formation.

IV. Commissioning / sending on mission: Launching them in life and sending them as ‘fishers of youth’ that they may learn through doing.

3) Integrated approach: A matter of confusion in youth ministry is that there is often a youth policy document, but it is often narrowly translated into a project, an organisation or a programme. Youth ministry has to be much broader. An integrated approach also means active and sensitive approach to gender, culture, interest, education, etc. For instance, most of our youth programmes are not boy friendly. Often they are too “Churchy”, while boys want outdoor activity. On the other hand girls come in big numbers for Church programmes but then again, their identity, needs and styles are also not taken into consideration.

4) Co-ordinated effort: There is an urgent need for co-ordination and a facilitation mechanism among youth related realities in the diocese as well as in the country. There is a lot of duplication as well as conflict in the area. Dialogue and collaboration are needed among the various youth specific ministries in the Church such as education, fine art centres, catechetical work, social service, vocation promotion and religious formation, social concern, and youth organisations. As of now youth ministry is limited to an appointed post with a very narrow gamut of focus and activities. On the contrary youth ministry has to have better advocacy, dialogue and co-ordination.

5) Watching youth culture: It has assumed great interest in all levels of society and it should evoke immense interest and concern in all levels of the Church as well. Youth trends are the most authentic pulse of today and it is fast changing. The Church at all levels should have a plan of interaction on this “reading the signs of the times” (*Lk. 16:1*) and looking at the crowds (*Cf. Mt. 9:37*).

6) Train animators: Youth is very much 'today', the here and now and they are very much caught up with 'tomorrow', the hopes, dreams and possibilities. But they also need the 'yesterday' and an organic vision of yesterday-today-tomorrow or continuity. With the massive presence of youth in the society and the Church, training animators should assume greater focus in the Church. This should be reflected in the diocesan and parish planning as well as fund allocation. Seminary/religious formation and the ongoing formation should be viewed also as this training for contemporary times.

7) Secular youth approach: The Church's youth ministry is mostly with those who come to us. But the best of the lot and the influential ones are out there in the wider world: the professionals, the artists, the talented ones and those in focused leadership. The youth ministry in the Church has to be a) forming youth animators, b) forming the leaven of youth, c) caring for the wider Catholic youth, and finally d) the Church's presence to the youth in the wider society. The Church needs a vision of youth work in the wider society. Much in the Church's work such as media, education, social work, etc., address this dimension, but there is great room for progress. Wherever youth gather, like sports, media, politics or enjoyment, the Church has to have a special interest. Youth clubs, art groups, social concern groups and other initiatives of youth themselves should be seen as the true promptings of the Holy Spirit and should be supported by the official as well as the unofficial Church, of course, without take over threat.

SEVEN STEPS IN YOUTH GUIDANCE

We have to have a plan of leading youth out there from being ordinary troubled youth to missionaries leading others to Christ in their life situations. How do we go about it?

1. LOVE YOUTH: Know them, pray for them; attract and challenge.
2. WALK WITH THEM: Be positive, help them to have a fresh outlook, use their language and relevant dynamics.
3. INTRODUCE JESUS: Be their models to walk with Jesus; bring them to an experiential knowledge of Jesus.
4. HELP THEM IN SELF-DISCOVERY: They are individuals in need of growth, unique persons. Give confidence; encourage initiative.

5. HELP THEM TO BE PART OF A NEW MOVE: Give them new friends, a new culture, a movement to which they belong. Introduce them to cells, networking.

6. GIVE THEM A MISSION: Motivate them to reach out, evangelise, and build a new culture and world order.

7. SUPPORT THEIR QUEST FOR A NEW SPIRITUALITY: Help them discover relevant expressions of their faith drawing from the riches of the Church.

YOUTH-MISSION TECHNOLOGY: FORMING YOUTH AS MISSIONARIES

A young person charged with zeal for sharing Christ is the most potent reality for the Kingdom of God. Jesus and some of the great saints like Don Bosco had this special know-how of forming such youth full of the Holy Spirit. Church leaders of the youthful continent of Asia, more than ever, are in need of acquiring this special skill. Forming youth with evangelistic zeal and having Catholic groups that provide suitable ambience for nurturing missionary zeal is the need of the hour for the Church in Asia. “The Christian formation of young people in Asia should recognize that they are not only the object of the Church’s pastoral care but also agents and co-workers in the Church’s mission in her various apostolic works of love and service”.²⁴

Youth are the best people to win over other youth for Jesus. Youth, perhaps, enjoy certain advantages when they go out to share Jesus:

- They are practical, not flooded by theory, easily motivated and effective.
- Jesus, for them, is often a personal hero and it makes all the difference.
- Relationships are at the centre of their lives. It is the same with evangelisation. They spontaneously build communities.

- “Their freshness and enthusiasm, their spirit of solidarity and hope”²⁵ transforms all that they do, even the everyday Church life.

- A young missionary shows creativity at its height and restlessness about what is dry and boring. This can be powerful in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

²⁴ *Ibid.* no. 47.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

- They are an integral part of the multiethnic background of Asia and as such the best ones to be in dialogue with cultures in day-to-day life.

NEED FOR EFFECTIVE MISSION FORMATION

“If young people are to be effective agents of mission, the Church needs to offer them suitable pastoral care”²⁶. “It is the task of the Pastors to ensure that the laity are formed as evangelisers able to face the challenges of the contemporary world, not just with worldly wisdom and efficiency, but with hearts renewed and strengthened by the truth of Christ”²⁷. What the Holy Father speaks of as the ingredients of mission formation for lay people in general is relevant for the youth as well:

1. Clarity of Vision: Once they meet Christ in their lives, youth are filled with an eagerness to share this reality of great joy with their friends, celebrate it in a group setting, and share it with others. But they should be helped by mature Christians to have a conviction of their vocation to share Christ. This vocation “sets them firmly in the world to perform the most varied tasks, and it is here that they are called to spread the Gospel of Jesus”.

2. Encouragement and support: “In many Asian countries, lay people are already serving as true missionaries”.²⁸ The Church in general can draw much inspiration from this silent work of the Spirit. The best encouragement for those who are already involved in the missionary work is to extend the Church’s affirmation; especially by bringing them together to listen to their missionary efforts and wherever needed to offer guidance.

3. Evolving formation strategies, dynamics and materials: In order to ensure effective mission formation for youth, the Asian Church needs to develop more formation materials. We need more books and training modules. Using the Internet and TV is also important. Training of priests and religious to be effective evangelisers and motivators is significant. This is the age of models and networking. The best formation we can offer our

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* no. 45.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

youth is by showing them other youth who do effective evangelisation and helping them to learn from them.

4. Establishment of centres of formation: The Pope also speaks of diocesan and national centres of missionary formation for lay people. More than just building centres of formation, there has to be a coming together of people of evangelistic fervour searching for ways to multiply effective evangelisers.

5. Collaborated effort of the Youth movements and Official Church organisations: After Vatican II, there are many Ecclesial movements actively involved in the Pastoral ministry of the Church serving her needs through their charisms. A consolidated effort to reach out and support difficult countries/areas in Asia can bear fruit in the Evangelisation dreams of Asia.

All these efforts of youth missionary formation should never lose sight of the real life needs of youth. These training steps should “help young people to cope better with social pressure by offering them not only a more mature growth in the Christian life but also by help in the form of career guidance, vocation training and youth counselling”²⁹.

THE DOORS ARE OPENING

Today, across Asia, young people are gradually opening up to the presence of Christ in the Church like never before. Their numbers in the World Youth Day celebrations have been growing considerably. Besides, through their participation in the growing number of contemporary catholic movements, teenagers and youth are choosing to set aside time to pray, develop deep meaningful, spiritually enriching friendships and to reach out to other youth. The changing face of Catholic media and technology is also playing a crucial role in this opening up. Today young people can choose from a host of Catholic bands, singers, performers and worship leaders who play and compose music that are in tune with the tastes of young people – ranging from pop to hip hop. Many of them are also beginning to check out Catholic websites, download applications and choosing to be members of Catholic youth networks and forums. Thus Christ-centred spirituality is slowly beginning to become a part of several youth.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 47.

CONCLUSION

Youth is the greatest challenge today and the Church, as in all generations, is eager to face this task. But a multi-pronged, integrated approach is the holistic path for contemporary youth guidance: not just inside the Church, but also in the living room, in school, on the road, in the field, at the market, in the theatre, at the club and the like. Here the priests, the religious and the elders are only “animators”, for the real youth ministers are youth themselves.

What the Church in Asia will become in the years to come will solely depend on the way in which she faces the greatest challenge of today, that is, the fast growing and fast changing reality of youth and children. The transforming presence of the mobile phone, the internet and other emerging realities of the media along with the volatile, yet intensely goading dynamics of globalisation and commercialisation are deepening the dimensions of this challenge. It is up to the Church not to smother her missionary urge under the security of her institutions, but to listen to the promptings of God’s Spirit and face the challenges of this mighty Goliath to win over the contemporary generation for Christ and His love.

In John Paul II we had a Pope who had learnt the secret of filling youth with missionary zeal. May his words and actions find an echo in us: “The many complex problems which young people now face in the changing world of Asia impel the Church to remind the young of their responsibility for the future of the society and the Church, and to encourage and support them at every step... To them the Church offers the truth of the Gospel as a joyful and liberating mystery to be known, lived and shared, with conviction and courage”.³⁰

This Millennium dawned with the prophecy of our late Holy Father about reaping a harvest of faith in the soil of Asia. How many of us understand the urgency, the need of telling the story of Jesus in this vast continent ‘through our deeds and words’? How many of us realize the grace we have received from the Spirit to accomplish His mission according to the will of the Father?

And we have a Holy Father now who knows the challenges and the heart of the youth world and addressed eight million youth during the 2005 WYD in Cologne. “Dear young

³⁰ *Ibid.*

people, the happiness you are seeking, the happiness you have a right to enjoy has a name and a face: it is Jesus of Nazareth, hidden in the Eucharist. Only he gives the fullness of life to humanity! With Mary, say your own “yes” to God, for He wishes to give himself to you. I repeat today what I said at the beginning of my Pontificate: “If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great”.³¹

The Orientation for the Asian Mission Congress of 2006 gave this reminder: “Let every baptized person – the Pope, Bishops, Priests, religious and Laity become more aware that he or she is called because of baptism, to announce the message of Jesus Christ, Saviour and Redeemer, everyday of our life, in every circumstance to which our personal history leads us, and to those we come in contact with. Let this Mission Congress be an opportunity to realise that the whole people of God is “on mission””.³²

In *Ecclesia in Asia* the Holy Father Pope John Paul II says: “The Church is convinced that deep within the people, cultures and religions of Asia there is a thirst for “living water” (cf. *Jn.* 4:10-15), a thirst which the Spirit himself has created and which Jesus the Saviour alone can fully satisfy.”³³ And he continues, “The words of the Apostle Paul become still more pointed, given the many people on that continent who have never encountered the person of Jesus in any clear and conscious way: “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. But how are they to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?” (*Rom* 10:13-14)”.³⁴ So then, let us ask ourselves, “If I don’t do this mission, who else will do it? If I don’t do this, what else can I do better than this in my life? And if I don’t do it now, when am I going to do it?”

As one who has been actively involved in youth ministry for the last 22 years, and has travelled to more than 40 countries and conducted more than 800 training programmes for youth leaders, I find immense joy in working with the youth which, for me, is the greatest privilege I enjoy in my life as a Catholic Missionary. Let me close with a prayer for the rise

³¹ BENEDICT XVI, Celebration welcoming the young people on the occasion of the XX World Youth Day, Cologne - Poller Wiesen, Thursday, 18 August 2005.

³² M. SATURNINO DIAS (Ed.). *Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia: A Celebration of Faith and Life*. Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore 2007, p. 125.

³³ JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 18

³⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 19.

of many more young missionaries who will dare to take up their crosses and follow the one who loved us beyond all borders.