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## **Youth Masses**

“Church is boring.” This is the complaint that I’ve come to expect from most of the teenagers I have known over seven years of experience in youth ministry. Well over three-quarters of the kids going to Catholic Junior and Senior High Schools find attendance at Mass onerous at best, if they attend at all. At the same time as taking their complaint as a statement about the quality of liturgy in the average Mass, we should also see it as identifying a deeper underlying problem: relevance. The problem is not the fact that most teenagers find Mass “boring,” it’s the fact that the mysteries celebrated in the Eucharist seem to be totally disconnected from their daily lives.

This is the challenge faced by our Church today: finding a way to make the celebration of the Eucharist relevant to teenagers. One possible solution to this challenge is the “Youth Mass,” a special Mass that caters to the tastes and experiences of youth. Youth Masses have their proponents and their detractors, their positive and negative points. I will attempt to present some of these points, relying on research statistics and authoritative opinions from liturgists and youth leaders in the field, but I will also draw upon some of my own experiences in youth ministry in formulating a position on the celebration of Youth Masses.

### *The Problem*

A survey taken by the *National Bulletin on Liturgy* on youth participation in Sunday Mass showed that about two in five teenagers attends Sunday Mass regularly. Of those who do,

many are unhappy with the nature and quality of these celebrations, and don't see their attendance as having any effect on their lives ("Youth and Liturgy I" 198). Complaints about the Masses themselves usually focus on the types of music, the dynamism and relevance of preaching, and level of hospitality in the community.

In terms of music, the teens that responded to the survey emphasized the importance of good, lively, and participatory music. It should be noted that there was no unanimity in terms of the type of music that should be played at Mass; some teens wanted more contemporary sounding music, others thought that would be inappropriate. In light of the results that were compiled, the recommendation was that a dialogue between youth and those who organize the liturgy, particularly the music, should take place, so that teenaged input can be heard (ibid. 301f).

As for preaching, the large number of responses that were received indicates the importance of good preaching to the average teen. There seems to be hunger for good preaching, preaching that is "relevant, interesting, and brief" (ibid. 306). The main concern seems to be that preaching have a phenomenological component: it should speak to the needs of teens today. "Youth want imaginative, concrete ideals and incarnate Christianity rather than purely intellectual concepts" (ibid.). Of course, the call for quality preaching need not only be seen in terms of meeting the needs of youth, but can be extrapolated to all forms of liturgy.

During teenage years, youths focus on self-discovery and personal identity. Given this, they show a need for a sense of belonging to a community, and a need for intimacy. From the perspective of this need, many teens are unsatisfied with the anonymity that prevails in many Catholic liturgies (ibid. 309). Their inability to relate to the practice of the liturgy magnifies this problem. Faced with these realities, we are challenged to make the church a more welcoming

environment, and to open up opportunities for youth involvement in the practice, and even the planning, of liturgy.

The problems of bringing youth into active participation in the mass may be related to their catechetical education as children. Typically, Catholic children are instructed in their faith through their preparation for the sacraments, often at early ages. As Lombaerts puts it, children are often given the answers to various philosophical and religious issues before they are old enough to formulate the questions (314); this confusion costs them the opportunity to appropriate Catholic teaching within the context of their own faith journey. What then seems to be needed is a chance for teens to re-examine those faith questions as they encounter them, within a religious context that is sensitive to their needs for intimacy, community and self-discovery. Church youth groups and youth retreats can meet some of these needs, but given the central role of the Eucharist in the expression of Catholic faith, one must look into the possible advantages of establishing a celebration that addresses these needs within a liturgical context. This opens the door to the question of Youth Mass.

#### *Advantages of Youth Masses*

The concept of the “Youth Mass” is essentially a mass whose elements cater to youth, and is organized by youth. Ideally youths, under the guidance of qualified liturgical leaders, organize and implement a liturgy that focuses on the tastes and needs of their peers, particularly in music, preaching, and hospitality. One can see the advantages of this approach from a phenomenological perspective. Laying a foundation that permits teenage participants to connect everyday life to liturgy, like music, story telling, etc., they can be brought to understanding what the Paschal mystery has to say to and about their experience. This can lead to a deepening of

their relationship with God and with each other. Rather than seeing Church as separate from their lives, they can grow to see how God has a role in not only in the liturgy, but also in their everyday experiences. As Vlaun puts it, “if the Mass is to be the ‘summit and source’ of the lives of the faithful, one must provide for the liturgy to flow into and from our lives” (17).

Fr. Vlaun notes that having a liturgy consisting almost entirely of youth creates a context wherein one can use more unconventional means of reaching teens at a phenomenological level. Among such means he includes the use of secular rock ‘n’ roll music in a mass. Of course, a context like this would not exist in a wedding, where the congregation consists of a wide spectrum of age groups and backgrounds. However, in a Youth Mass, such a practice would be appropriate, and would be very effective in reaching out to teens, given the importance that popular music has for them (18). Based on this argument, a Youth Mass would open the possibility for other adjustments: a more casual approach to homiletics (which could include dramatizations) and more creativity in ritual. Such modifications would be appropriate given the context of a congregation consisting almost exclusively of youths, and through these modifications, liturgy is afforded a greater opportunity to speak to their lives.

Giving teens a greater involvement in preparing and participating in Mass through a Youth Mass allows them to make a crucial transition in their understanding of both the church and their faith. By taking ownership of their faith as expressed in the Youth Mass, they are allowed to understand their own role in the church. Mass is no longer performed by “the Priest” for them, or by “the church” as an anonymous institution; Mass becomes the teenagers own expression of thanksgiving to God for His grace. Youth can thus learn that they are the church, the body of Christ, which offers up the Mass as a thanksgiving sacrifice to God and a meal of fellowship with one another in Christ.

*Disadvantages of Youth Masses*

There are potential problems with Youth Masses. First and foremost is the problem of segregation from the greater community. Having a Youth Mass could divide the community. Rather than attempting to understand and integrate youth into a larger community, a Parish can choose the *easy out* of separating its Youth, giving them their *own* Mass to celebrate. What these two groups could have offered each other is then lost. Not only will the Youth miss out on participation with the greater community, the greater community will miss out on the involvement of its youth.

One of the main facets of Catholic liturgy is unity; in celebrating liturgy, one is united with people of faith throughout the world, in all different classes, races, and ages. Barrie writes, “Liturgy needs to be the work of the entire community. Their [youth] participation in Mass adds to the community’s celebration because during liturgy we put aside differences and concentrate on the fact that we are the Body of Christ” (17). By dividing a parish between normal and Youth Masses, the community building aspect of liturgy, wherein different people from different perspectives are called out of themselves, to look beyond their own view and to embrace others in love, this important function of liturgy can be lost (Janco 16).

In having a celebration that is so unique, so different from the common experience of the Eucharist, one is faced with the possibility that youths who celebrate Youth Masses will not continue to go to regular Mass as adults. Leaving out the formative aspect of the Youth Mass can be a grievous error; according to the “Directory for Masses with Children,” Children’s Masses should lead the participants towards the celebration of the Eucharist with adults (21). Clearly, this is no less so in the case of Youth Masses.

Another danger with Youth Masses is that those who lead them can at times not be properly educated to minister to youth in their needs and circumstances. Those who minister to youth, especially in a liturgical setting, have to be keenly aware of the social, emotional, and psychological needs of this unique age group. Without such an education, ministers can be tempted to project their own needs onto their teens. One thing that I have witnessed is that Youth Masses tend to be highly emotionally charged in nature, with various exaggerated gestures and body movements, highly emotional music (perhaps to the point of being manipulative), and overwhelming preaching. When this is the case, usually the leaders are young to middle aged adults, and there can be a tendency for these adults to try to bring the teens they are ministering to up to their own emotional level. This is potentially dangerous; a teenager hasn't the life experience or the maturity to synthesize adult emotions. An emotional high is produced in these teens; then, they often turn to each other to help them interpret this high, which often results in personal boundary violations. In addition, rarely do these feelings maintain themselves beyond a couple of days, having no rational basis. Teens can effectively become addicted to these strong emotions, and the exaggerated and artificial intimacy that goes along with them

Along these lines, we can find one more problem with Youth Masses. Many teenagers, most in fact, do not respond to emotional displays as those described above. They find them "weird," and stay away ("Youth and Liturgy I" 309). Often the church has nothing else to offer teenagers like these. Thus, by adopting such a specific spirituality, Youth Masses can further alienate the majority of teenagers from the Church. The central problem here is that the leaders, rather than bringing themselves down to the emotional and spiritual level of the teenagers they minister to, instead try to bring the teens up to their own. This is extremely poor pedagogy, and is usually tied to an emotional faith that is not tempered with reason.

### *Conclusion*

In my opinion, the advantages of having Youth Masses are too overwhelming to ignore. Celebrated properly, they can directly contact the phenomenon of teenage life, and relate it to the Paschal mystery. Youth Masses can effectively educate teenagers to the point of seeing the relevance of the sacred mysteries in their everyday lives. However, the Youth Mass needs to be continually focused on forming youth towards a greater understanding of their faith, so that they can grow into full, active and conscious participation in “normal” Mass, and in the greater community at large. For this reason, I believe that Youth Masses a) should be celebrated at most once a month, b) should be directed towards encouraging teens to celebrate “normal” Mass on the other Sundays of the month, c) should also encourage teens to become involved in those “normal” liturgies, and in other parish related functions as well, and d) should be coordinated by youth leaders who are both well educated theologically and equipped with an accurate understanding of the needs of teenagers in our society.

The problem is clear: teenagers don't feel that there is a place for them in Church celebration. The Youth Mass is a solution to this problem, but it must not be the only one. Youth Masses should lead youth into greater involvement in their communities. This is in line with the function of liturgy, to draw us out of ourselves towards union with all peoples of faith, offering up one prayer of thanksgiving to the Father, the prayer of Christ. In this way we see that the expression of Christian identity through liturgical celebration must always lead to mission.

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