

## How should we talk to young people about their faith?



We can appear to young people as aliens from the planet Zog. We wear different clothes, listen to strange music and use language they would never think of using. This is the first lesson we need to learn as adults and potential youth ministers.

In a booklet on youthwork I have prepared for the bishops' conference, I noted that young people can have a different experience of the Church. Here are some of the words that young people do not find easy when talking about faith and church: (The thoughts of many young people on these words are echoed in the italics that follow and do not represent the writer's own views).

***Salvation - from what do I need to be saved? I think I am ok.***

***Sin - I make mistakes but I don't believe a good God would ever write me off***

***Real presence - Isn't God everywhere? What is different about the bread at mass?***

***Infallibility - I don't believe the Pope has a hotline to heaven***

***Contraception - using contraceptives is morally responsible behaviour***

As adults we should see ourselves as missionaries into the present culture through appreciating the lives of the young people who have to struggle with that same culture and make sense of it and become apostles to other young people. Missionaries have always had to learn new languages and translate the Gospel into very different words in order to be faithful to the Gospel.

Perhaps Don Bosco's greatest act of faith as a Saint was to believe in the goodness of every young person. In his day young people were mistrusted and exploited. He stood out as one who defended and befriended them. Today young people are still likely to be blamed for the ills of society, assumed to be out of control, on drugs, or involved in violence and crime. In fact most young people lead good lives

with a generosity and awareness that often goes unnoticed and unsung.

Young people make us think and challenge us to change. It was Don Bosco's belief that work with the young opened adults to God in a particular way; it was a vocation. Young people change your life, they throw you off-balance, they recognise your faults and they tell you; they test your compassion and generosity; in giving you a hard time they also bring your adult faith to life.

Any church that cannot hand on its faith and values to its own younger generation has reason to be fearful. On the other hand, any church that can listen fearfully and humbly to the experience of the young can take the church from its tired and shrinking world into the wider searching culture equipped with a new translation of the good news.

Until young people can enter into a dialogue with the Church, neither the Church nor young people can be fully renewed on their faith journey.

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