

Youth & Young Adult Catechesis
Ministering to Youth in a Media-Saturated Culture
Bob Rice

The *Agorà* was the chief marketplace of Athens, the center of the city's life. It was there that new ideas were discussed, the newest fashions were worn, the newest things purchased or sold. In short, it was the heart of Athenian culture.

Youth Consumed

So where is the *agorà* for youth? All road signs point towards *the media*. In a recently released study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation on the media consumption of 8 to 18 year olds in America, they concluded:

‘Over the past five years, young people have increased the amount of time they spend consuming media by an hour and seventeen minutes daily, from 6:21 to 7:38—almost the amount of time most adults spend at work each day, except that young people use media seven days a week instead of five. Moreover, given the amount of time they spend using more than one medium at a time, today's youth pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes worth of media content into those daily 7 1/2 hours—an increase of almost 2 1/4 hours of media exposure per day over the past five years.’

The document goes on to say that the greatest increase of teen media over the past five years has been in mobile communications. 66% of people from 8 to 18 have a media-enabled cell phone, which they use more for playing games and watching movies than communicating.

These are mind-blowing statistics, and they point to a harsh reality: The youth don't consume media. Media consumes them.

In the Second Vatican Council, well before the invention of the Internet or cellular phones, the *Decree on Social Communication* stated, ‘The Church recognizes that these media, if properly utilized, can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to men's entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God. The Church recognizes, too, that men can employ these media contrary to the plan of the Creator and to their own loss. Indeed, the Church experiences maternal grief at the harm all too often done to society by their evil use.’

And there has been much harm done to us through media.

‘Youth who spend more time with media report lower grades and lower levels of personal contentment... Nearly half (47%) of all heavy media users say they usually get fair or poor grades (mostly C's or lower), compared to 23% of light

media users. Heavy media users are also more likely to say they get into trouble a lot, are often sad or unhappy, and are often bored. Moreover, the relationships between media exposure and grades, and between media exposure and personal contentment, withstood controls for other possibly relevant factors such as age, gender, race, parent education, and single vs. two-parent households.’

So how can we preach the message of God’s love in the heart of this agorà? I would suggest two points. First, we must help them understand the many messages they receive from the media. Secondly, we must create new media to share with them the love of God.

Developing Media Literacy

Media is at the center of youth culture. You can’t just turn off the TV (they’ll download the video on their iPhone) or unplug the internet (it’s wireless). Youth are bombarded by images and messages they often don’t understand.

For example, I just took my kids to see ‘The Tooth Fairy’, a family movie about a guy who is forced to be a tooth fairy for two weeks because he tells children not to believe in their dreams. The movie was cute enough and on some levels had a positive message about not giving up on your dreams.

But there was one thing I found troubling: the hero of the movie was dating a woman with two children, and it was implied he often slept at her house. When he tried to hang out with her son, the son said he was just like ‘all the other boyfriends’ who used him to get to his mom. And at the end, the hero spontaneously proposes to the woman and she says ‘yes’— there are no ring, no plans. There’s just an emotional idea that clearly wasn’t thought through before it happened. What is the message there?

We have to help our youth think through the things they see or hear in their media. We should help them articulate what is good and what is bad. We need to help them make sense of it with a Catholic understanding.

‘Those who make use of the media of communications, especially the young... should endeavor to deepen their understanding of what they see, hear or read. They should discuss these matters with their teachers and experts, and learn to pass sound judgments on them.’

Our youth groups are a great place for those types of discussions. But helping them make sound judgments doesn’t mean we condemn it all. Remember that youth are connected to their culture, so when you reject the culture, they feel like you are rejecting them. Anyone can disregard *Twilight* because it’s a book about teenage vampires. But have you read it? Your teens probably have. For many girls, the question isn’t *if* they have read it, but *how many times* they have read it. There are both positive and negative messages in it.

Do a youth night on ‘The Good and Bad in Twilight’ and watch how engaged your teens will be.

‘But won’t that just encourage them to read books like that?’ the concerned person wonders. ‘If we talk about media all the time, won’t that encourage them to get more into it?’

Look at the statistics. Youth already spend more time with media than adults do at work. It’s time we help them understand what they are being consumed by.

Making New Media

No, this challenge isn’t directed at television executives or record labels. One of the great things about new technologies is that anyone can write a blog, record a podcast, or put a video on YouTube. *You* can create media that will speak to teens. And I bet the teens in your parish would love to help you do it.

Vatican II made it clear that we need to be media savvy. ‘The Catholic Church, since it was founded by Christ our Lord to bear salvation to all men and thus is obliged to preach the Gospel, considers it one of its duties to announce the Good News of salvation also with the help of the media of social communication and to instruct men in their proper use.’

Pope Benedict XVI recently encouraged priests to make better use of media: ‘Priests are thus challenged to proclaim the Gospel by employing the latest generation of audiovisual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs, websites) which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization and catechesis.’

I think that challenge for priests goes for all of us who work with youth. Record your talks and put them on-line. Blog about common questions teens have about the faith. Write an email that summarizes the message of the meeting sent to the teens and their parents to talk about together.

Using media to reinforce the Gospel message is a start, but there has to be more. John Paul II wrote,

‘Involvement in the mass media, however, is not meant merely to strengthen the preaching of the Gospel. There is a deeper reality involved here: since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church's authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the “new culture” created by modern communications.’

The *General Directory of Catechesis* says that we must ‘proclaim the Gospel to the world of youth with courage and creativity.’ This is where you get to be creative. Don’t

just record a video of a talk on Reconciliation. Sell it like a funny infomercial. Can we use poetry to express the beauty of God? Maybe there is a teen in your group who would love to do that.

The wonderful thing is that youth are very excited to help us speak this language if we're willing to take the time to learn it. But don't just throw them a video camera and say, 'make a movie.' Do it *with* them. Because you can share with them something more powerful than any media: a relationship based on the love of God. 'May the Lord make all of you enthusiastic heralds of the Gospel in the new 'agora' which the current media are opening up.'

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