

**An Ecumenical Gift Exchange:
Young Life, The Catholic Church and the Call of the New Evangelization
by Michael A. Haverkamp**

*“Make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other,
loving one another, and working together with one heart and purpose.”
Philippians 2:2*

This article is designed to introduce Catholics to Young Life and to envision the kingdom impact of a practical partnership between Protestants and Catholics in the work of evangelization. Taking seriously our Lord’s passionate prayer “that they may be one”(Jn 17:11), our hope is that the entire body of Christ would come together for the sake of young people everywhere who do not know the love of the Savior and the promise of God’s reign in Christ. The profound challenges of postmodern culture have confronted the church in unprecedented ways, leaving us both humbled and hungry for answers. Yet tried as we are, this state of affairs opens new opportunities for unity and partnership amongst the many members of Christ’s body to work together toward a veritable “springtime of Christianity” in the world today.¹

Young Life

In 1938, a young seminarian and Presbyterian youth leader named Jim Rayburn envisioned what it might mean to treat the local high school as his parish. Rayburn noticed that for every young person who attended his youth gatherings there were ten more who scurried in and out of the local high school but never shadowed the doorway of a church. In the years to come, Rayburn would revolutionize youth ministry by going where kids are, meeting them on their own turf and earning the right to be heard about the greatest love story ever told – the gospel of Jesus Christ. Three years later, after developing creative and winsome ways to share the love of Christ with teenagers, Rayburn founded the organization of Young Life and began a legacy of reaching “every kid, everywhere, for eternity.”

Since its incorporation in 1941, Young Life has grown into a worldwide ministry reaching over 1.2 million kids every year through real relationships with adults who care about teenagers. Young Life represents over four thousand staff and forty thousand volunteers ministering in over eighty countries around the globe. Every person engaged in the ministry of Young Life is driven by the same vision – that every adolescent will have the opportunity to know Jesus Christ and grow in their faith. With its fun and adventurous style, Young Life is on the front edge of the Church’s mission of evangelization, both embracing and challenging adolescent culture as it relates to the gospel. In the spirit of Vatican II *aggiornamento*, Young Life leaders

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio (Mission of the Redeemer)*, 2.

seek real solidarity with the “joys and hopes, the grief and anguish” of today’s young people, calling them more deeply into abundant life through friendship with God.²

Young Life’s Methodology

Young Life leaders can be found everywhere kids are – at sporting events and school dances, skate parks and coffee shops. Inspired by the One who “took on flesh and made his dwelling among us”(Jn 1:14), Young Life leaders love kids so much that they are willing to leave the comfort of their adult worlds to become true friends and mentors for teenagers. The old adage still holds, “Kids don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Through real relationships, Young Life leaders in every country and culture earn the right to be heard about the most important person kids will ever meet – Jesus Christ. At appropriate and Spirit-led times, Young Life leaders can walk across that bridge of authentic friendship and share the love of God.

This follows precisely the wisdom articulated by the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, issued in 1965. “If the church is to be in a position to offer all women and men the mystery of salvation,” the world’s bishops exhort, “then it must implant itself in the same way Christ by his incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the women and men among who he lived.”³ Young Life leaders know what the prelates of the Council were preaching, that if you want to really reach kids today you can’t simply make an announcement in the church bulletin. Rather, you’ve got to go where kids are, pursuing them with the same love Christ revealed in the incarnation.

If there is one thing that defines Young Life’s approach to Christian mission, it is *relationship*. Francis Cardinal George of Chicago once quipped, “We will never evangelize what we do not love.” Young Life leaders do not see kids as participants in a program. They show their love for teenagers by spending time with them, listening to them, and sharing in their experiences. As any kid will tell you, it is not airtight apologetics that they are looking for but authentic human relationships where Jesus can be seen and experienced in concert with formal proclamation. It’s people over program, relationship over rhetoric. Paul Wallace described what it was that changed his own life, “I am not a Christian because it ‘makes sense’ or because

² *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 1.

³ *Ad Gentes Divinitus* (Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity), 10. The Catholic Church, like Young Life, places relationship at the center of all evangelizing activity. *Ad Gentes* reports, “In order to bear fruitful witness to Christ, they should establish relationships of respect and love towards those people, they should acknowledge themselves members of the group in which they live, and through the various undertakings and affairs of human life they should share in their social and cultural life.” This provides the perfect description for what Young Life calls “contact work,” going where kids are, building real relationships and truly sharing life with kids.

someone sat down and diagrammed it for me. I am a Christian because I have been loved deeply and unconditionally by Christians.”⁴

A Personal Introduction

The Catholic Church has played a powerful role in my religious life and ministerial formation. I was not raised Catholic, yet after a powerful religious conversion in Africa while serving in the Peace Corps, my religious journey led me, one small step at a time, into the mysterious world of Catholicism. The Catholic tradition introduced me to the rich teachings of the early church fathers, the meticulous dialectics of St. Thomas Aquinas, and the courageous witness of Oscar Romero. I’ve been inspired by Merton and Maritain, Newman and Nouwen, Anselm and Arrupe. I simply fell in love with the Catholic Church and entered into full communion with earnest and awe. My insatiable theological appetite led me to formal academic studies, earning an MA in systematic theology in 2006 at Aquinas Institute of Theology (St. Louis, MO) and inspiring my current doctoral work in Christian spirituality at Washington Theological Union (Washington, D.C.).

As a Catholic, I have also found a home in the ministry of Young Life. Having served the mission in various capacities since 1999 – from direct ministry with kids to training leaders to developing new ministries throughout the Midwest – my appreciation for Young Life’s ministry to kids is strong. Young Life’s appropriation of the incarnation as an explicit model of evangelization has taught me a great deal about effective and life-changing ministry. Personally, I have found that Young Life and the Catholic Church provide the most invigorating way for me to live out my love of God and love of neighbor, and in proclaiming the gospel to the world at large.

Young Life & the Catholic Church

In my new role as Young Life’s liaison to the Catholic Church, my hope is to foster a deeper and more missionally fruitful relationship between the ministry of Young Life and the Catholic Church. I believe that Christians of every confession working together to reach kids is paramount. Jesus calls all of his followers into unity. While modern appeals to unity are often little less than stately platitudes, the Lord emphasizes that the bonds of unity between Christians directly impact the credibility of our witness to the world.⁵ While our human divisions erect stumbling blocks for the world and obscure the call of Christ, we are deeply encouraged that “there increases from day to day a movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians.”⁶ Young Life embraces the ecumenical

⁴ Paul Wallace, *Why I Am a Christian* (online at psnt.net/blog/2010/12/why-i-am-a-christian/, as of May 8, 2012 found in Sherry A Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus*, Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2012, 139.

⁵ Jn 17:11, 21, 23.

⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (That They May Be One), 7.

impulse that calls every member of the body of Christ to holiness and participation in the redemptive work of God.

As an interdenominational ministry, Young Life is committed to honoring the broad spectrum of Christian faith traditions in which our young people were raised – Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, mainline, etc. Young Life has great respect for God’s work in kids’ hearts long before their involvement in our mission and we encourage every young person to be involved in their local parish. Our policy could be summed up simply – “grow them where they’ve been planted.” For our teenaged friends who were raised Catholic, our aim is to help them be the best Catholics they can be. We respect their unique traditions and encourage their participation in their local parishes. Our focus and our passion is adolescents, and Young Life has developed an effective, fun and time-tested strategy for introducing young people to Jesus Christ and helping them grow in their faith.

The single biggest obstacle preventing Catholic parents and priests from trusting Young Life is the fear that Young Life staff and leaders will pull Catholic kids away from the Catholic Church. Worse yet, stories are told about Protestant groups intentionally targeting Catholic kids, attacking their faith and pressuring them to leave the Catholic Church in order to be “saved” or to “become a Christian.” This egregious mistake does NOT represent Young Life’s approach to Catholics. Young Life is committed to respecting Catholic kids and earning the trust of Catholic families to aid them in the spiritual development of their children. I believe that a partnership between Young Life and the Catholic Church holds dynamic results for the future of our kids and for the fulfillment of our mission as the people of God.

Evangelization: Is That Even Catholic?

Throughout every age, the Catholic Church has considered it her greatest joy and challenge to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in ways that engage, inspire and challenge both individuals and the culture at large. At its core, Christianity is a missionary movement. The Church “exists in order to evangelize,” proclaimed Pope Paul VI.⁷ The life and ministry of Jesus serves as the fount and foundation of everything we do as the body of Christ, “I must proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God for that is what I was sent to do”(Lk 4:43). It doesn’t get any more Catholic than evangelization.

Emerging from the pluralistic context of the Roman Empire, the early church encouraged an open exchange of ideas where the unique claim of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”(Eph 4:5) could be understood and appropriated by a vast and diverse audience. As Pope John Paul II noted in his first encyclical, “The Church’s fundamental function in every age, and particularly in ours, is to direct man’s gaze, to

⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World), 14.

point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity toward the mystery of Christ.”⁸

The work of evangelization is always a contextual affair. The apostle Paul engaged the men of Athens and their altar to an unknown god, “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you”(Acts 17:21). Justin Martyr appealed to the Roman ideals of Augustus Caesar and the public cult to challenge the persecution of Christians and uphold the rationality of Christianity. St. Thomas Aquinas engaged the observations of Aristotelian philosophy and revealed the inherent complementarity of faith and reason. St. Ignatius of Loyola embraced the humanism of the Renaissance and embodied a spirituality which was able to see God in all things.

The Cultural Context Today

The postmodern period represents both a unique challenge and a critical opportunity for the Church today. In this time of growing secularization, skepticism and religious indifference, the Church’s universal mission of proclaiming Christ *ad gentes* is a difficult one. From the 2012 world Synod of Bishops came the sober assessment, “We are living in a particularly significant historic moment of change, of tension and of a loss of equilibrium and points of reference.”⁹ Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly stated that the world today is “facing social and cultural changes that are profoundly affecting a person’s perception of self, the world, and a person’s way of believing in God.”¹⁰

While these changes distort and undermine the genuine faith of Christian communities around the world, the greatest concern is the widespread abandonment of religious faith evidenced in Europe and, increasingly, right here in the United States. Sadly, one out of every five Americans describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or unaffiliated with religion.¹¹ The Catholic statistics are even more sobering. According to the Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey of 2008, only 30% of Americans who were raised Catholic still consider themselves Catholic today.¹² Only 23% of U.S. Catholics attend Mass each week.¹³ Nearly four times as many adults have left the Catholic Church as have entered it, most by the age of eighteen.

⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (The Redeemer of Man), 10.

⁹ *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, Synod of Bishops (XIII Ordinary General Assembly), Introduction, 3.

¹⁰ Helen Hull Hitchcock, “Synod of Bishops: A New Evangelization for Today’s World,” *The Adoremus Bulletin* (Oct 2012), 12.

¹¹ Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One in Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, Oct 9, 2012.

¹² Pew Research Center, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, Feb 2008.

¹³ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), “Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice among U.S. Catholics,” CARA, Georgetown University,

How Is This Problem To Be Addressed?

The challenges are legion and have commanded the attention of the Church for decades. Ever since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has recommitted its energies to interpreting the “signs of the times” and adapting to the ever-shifting, always evolving cultural and philosophical tides. Without question, something new is required. “The situation is requiring the Church to consider, in an entirely new way, how she proclaims and transmits the faith.”¹⁴

Thus presents the “new evangelization,” the primary focal point of the modern church and the enduring legacy of the pontificates of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II.¹⁵ Pope Paul VI dedicated his entire pontificate to the task of evangelization. Even his choice of the name Paul symbolized his passion to reawaken the evangelical zeal of the great Apostle to the Gentiles. Pope John Paul II carried the torch further, discerning God’s call on his life to be “a pilgrim pope of evangelization, walking down the roads of the world, bringing to all peoples the message of salvation.”¹⁶ No one spoke more frequently and more ardently about the new evangelization than Blessed John Paul II. Cardinal Avery Dulles noted, “The evangelical shift brought about by Vatican II, Paul VI and John Paul II is one of the most dramatic developments in modern Catholicism.”¹⁷

What’s So New About the “New Evangelization”?

Certainly nothing is new about the content of the Church’s evangelizing efforts. The message is always the same, that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son”(Jn 3:16). The Church holds that the most intimate truth “shines forth for us in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of revelation.”¹⁸ God has revealed himself fully in the Person of Jesus Christ who offers eternal life for

Washington, D.C., cara.georgetown.edu/sacraments.html (accessed October 25, 2012).

¹⁴ Synod of Bishops (XIII General Assembly), *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Faith*, Vatican City, Feb 2, 2011, *Lineamata*, 3.

¹⁵ During the time this article was authored (late October 2012), the 13th general assembly of the Synod of Bishops was convening in Vatican City to deliberate on the theme of the new evangelization.

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, Arrival Speech in Mexico City, May 6, 1990, *L’Osservatore Romano* (English ed.), May 7, 1990, 1,12.

¹⁷ Avery Cardinal Dulles, “John Paul II and the New Evangelization: What Does It Mean?” in *John Paul II and the New Evangelization*, ed. Ralph Martin & Peter Williamson, 9, Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006.

¹⁸ *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation), 2.

those who follow him. Simply put, “The New Evangelization seeks to invite modern man [and woman] into a relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church.”¹⁹

The essential message is unchanging. The Catholic Church, however, is asking for new methods, new expressions and a new vigor for Christian ministry. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops recently published a document outlining, with greater specificity, the key components of the new evangelization needed to restore a vibrant and effective witness of Christ in the world today – prayer and personal relationship with God, the development of leadership teams, an atmosphere of hospitality and trust, the call to conversion and ongoing relational follow-up.

The “Ecumenical Gift Exchange”

Could it be that the Catholic Church and Young Life were made to be in relationship? Could it be that at this point in history, Young Life and the Catholic Church have something very critical to offer one another? Margaret O’Gara, professor of theology at the University of St. Michael’s College in Toronto, writes “the Roman Catholic Church brings many rich offerings but it needs as well the readiness to receive from other churches what it lacks in its poverty, for a full and fruitful proclamation of the Gospel.”²⁰ In other words, if the universal church is to effectively proclaim the gospel, it needs the gifts of *all* of the faithful. We are mutually impoverished without one another. The Catholic Church recognizes that all baptized Christians are already in real albeit imperfect communion.²¹ Though impaired by our divisions, we are still one body in Christ. What O’Gara and others envision is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church offering its manifold contributions at the common table of the world’s greatest needs. A great “ecumenical gift exchange” is at hand, endowing the body of Christ to be fully animated to continue the work of building God’s kingdom today.

By no means does Young Life see itself as the solitary antidote for the Church’s ills. The Church calls ALL baptized Christians to work together to proclaim the gospel and promote the common good. Both Young Life and the Catholic Church have something important to give and receive. The Catholic tradition represents a veritable treasure trove of theological reflection and spiritual wisdom. Its sacramental worldview, its reconciliation of faith and reason and its commitment to justice are but a few of the gifts which our Protestant brothers and sisters would be blessed to receive and explore. Many of my Protestant friends are elated to discover

¹⁹ Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, *Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C., 2012.

²⁰ Margaret O’Gara, “On the Road Toward Unity: The Present Dialogue Among the Churches,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 48 (1993), 20.

²¹ See *Unitatis Redintegratio* (The Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism), 3.

the lives and teachings of Catholics who they've never heard of but nonetheless inspire their faith – Francis de Sales, Therese of Lisieux, Charles de Foucauld, Yves Congar, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and countless others.

Beyond its rich intellectual tradition, the Catholic Church also has an immense deposit of pastoral gifts to offer Young Life's leaders as they pursue "every kid, everywhere." With over one billion Catholics worldwide, there is no bigger body of believers to welcome and support Young Life staff wherever they may find themselves. The depth of its liturgy and the intimacy of the Eucharist offers real nourishment for those who draw near. *Lectio divina*, the liturgy of the hours and Eucharistic adoration are incredible ways to strengthen our relationship with God and others. The Catholic Church has much to give to the mission of Young Life.

What does Young Life have to give to the Catholic Church?

For many Catholics, there are few things that can clear a room faster than the mere mention of the word "evangelization." In a moment of almost comical understatement, Cardinal Avery Dulles casually remarked in a lecture at Fordham University, "The majority of Catholics are not strongly inclined toward evangelization."²² Even after fifty years of the Church emphatically proclaiming the need for a new evangelization, most Catholics have not yet warmed up to such evangelical (small 'e') language, dismissing it out of hand as a "Protestant thing." Yet as we've seen, the Church echoes the words of Jesus as it unabashedly calls its flock to a new evangelizing fervor, "Do not be afraid! Go and make disciples," (Mt 28:10 and 19).

Young Life leaders live, breathe and celebrate evangelization. For them it's a lifestyle, the most natural way for them to live into the fullness of life that Christ offers. It's not forced or manipulative. God never meant it to be contrived and it doesn't have to be. Young Life leaders engage Christ's commandment to make disciples of all nations with joy, a sense of adventure and the confidence that God is truly with them. They approach kids with the same spirit as did St. Paul, "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us" (1 Thes 2:8). Young Life leaders can teach Catholics how to embrace the challenge of the new evangelization in natural, effective, and yes even *fun* ways.

Kerygma: The Call to Conversion²³

²² Bishop William R. Houck, "The Fundamental Mission of Every Believer," in *John Paul II and the New Evangelization*, ed. Ralph Martin & Peter Williamson, 49, Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006.

²³ The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops reminds us that conversion should not be understood as a one-time event but a life-long process of inviting Christ into the center of one's life. "The New Evangelization does not seek to invite people to experience only one moment of conversion but rather to experience the

Secondly, the Church knows that if it expects to evangelize others, it must be open to ongoing evangelization and conversion itself. “[The Church] always needs to be called together afresh by Him . . . and be converted to the Lord.”²⁴ In other words, we can’t give away what we don’t have. We can’t lead others to where we’ve never been. We Catholics need to remember that we lead first by our example. This is a challenge for Catholics who may fall into the category described by Bishop Samuel Jacobs, former chairman of the US Bishop’s Committee for Evangelization:

“Because many of those baptized as infants are culturally or nominally Catholic and may never have internalized their faith, they need to meet the person of Jesus Christ through a new proclamation, so that at the root of their relationship with Jesus will be an authentic conversion of heart and mind.”²⁵

When adults participate in the mission of Young Life, faith is simply contagious. I’ve seen so many adults become alive in their faith by serving and leading in Young Life. But to be clear, the best of Young Life comes from its focus and its effectiveness in transforming kids. Young Life’s ministry is uniquely designed and equipped to proclaim the gospel in ways that elicit conversion and new faith, something the Church has historically called the *kerygma*. The *kerygma* is the initial heralding of the great story of God - a narrative replete with hope and despair, epic struggles and heroic victory – with Christ as the central character. Kerygmatic preaching, in both word and deed, excites faith in new believers as well as those Christians who have settled into spiritual nominalism. Young Life’s founder, Jim Rayburn, once said:

Christ is the strongest, grandest, most attractive personality ever to grace the earth. But a careless messenger with the wrong method can reduce all this magnificence to the level of boredom . . . And it is a sin to bore anyone with the gospel!²⁶

Never boring kids yet not intending to simply entertain them, Young Life’s presentation of the gospel brings to life the inherent drama of the greatest love story

gradual and lifelong process of conversion: to draw all people into a deeper relationship with God, to participate in the sacramental life of the Church, to develop a mature conscience, to sustain one’s faith through ongoing catechesis, and to integrate one’s faith into all aspects of one’s life.³⁴ The process of conversion and evangelization that accomplishes the objectives above must include the witness of the Church through her members in the everyday living out of the Gospel.”

²⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World), 15.

²⁵ Bishop Samuel Jacobs, “Introduction,” *John Paul II and the New Evangelization: How You Can Bring the Good News to Others*, Ed. Ralph Martin & Peter Williamson, Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006, xviii.

²⁶ Kit Sublet (ed.), *The Diaries of Jim Rayburn*, Colorado Springs, CO: Morningstar Press, 2008, xviii.

ever told. Drawing from real relationships with kids, Young Life leaders are able to bring the truths of the gospel right into the context of modern-day adolescents. “It wasn’t that I hadn’t heard a lot of this before in church,” one teen said, “but the WAY Young Life spoke about Jesus made Him come alive for me.” Hearing the compelling story of Christ awakens the seeds of faith that were laid in baptism and sends kids back to the Church where they can more actively engage in Catholic parish life.

Isn’t Catechism Enough?

The Catholic tradition has a strong history of catechesis. It takes seriously its duty to teach and pass down the faith to each successive generation. Teaching the doctrinal, moral and historical content of the faith is essential for the full development of Catholic faith but by itself is not sufficient to meet the needs of kids (or adults) today. Solid catechesis must be naturally coupled with the dynamic communication of the story of God (the *kerygma*) and an effective call to conversion. Many Catholics have been well catechized but as Thomas Merton once noted, “Catechism is one of the most tremendous things in the world. . . but it takes a conversion to really bring this home.”²⁷

“We can’t start with catechesis,” Sherry Weddell of the Catherine of Siena Institute suggested. “They aren’t ready for it yet, and if they aren’t ready, it will just roll off like water off a duck’s back.”²⁸ Catechesis is intended for those who have, in the words of Pope John Paul II, already “accepted by faith the person of Jesus Christ as the one Lord and have given him complete adherence.”²⁹ Kids are rarely drawn into conversion and change of heart by coherent intellectual argument, yet many Catholic programs focus precisely on this kind of formation. “Young people were taught to be critical consumers of information,” noted Timothy Muldoon, Catholic theologian at Boston College. “What is so utterly foreign to many [Catholics] is the experience of falling in love with God.”³⁰

Young Life has developed a critical expertise in youth evangelization that not only elicits change of heart and welcomes kids into dynamic relationship with God, but it proves its commitment to walking with kids as they “try on” their faith in the real world. Putting Christ at the center of one’s life is a game-changer. Faith allows us to see the world through a whole new set of eyes. This is a difficult adjustment for adolescents and they need faithful and trusted mentors who can guide them as they grow in the Lord. Through real relationships, Young Life leaders are there to help their teenaged friends with any of the challenges that come their way. As one teen

²⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1948, 237.

²⁸ Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus*, Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2012, 125.

²⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* (Catechesis In Our Time), 20.

³⁰ Timothy P. Muldoon, “Postmodern Spirituality and the Ignatian *Fundamentum*,” *The Way*, 44/1 (January 2005), 94.

noted, “People had taught me what Christians believe, but no one had told me how Christians live.”³¹ Through their commitment to incarnational evangelization, Young Life leaders give kids a living portrait of faith, “Christ with flesh on.”

Discipleship

The Church calls this *discipleship*. Of all the methodologies called for by the U.S. bishops to fulfill the call of the new evangelization, discipleship is listed first.³² In *Disciples Called to Witness*, the USCCB’s Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis states that “one seeking to learn how to be a disciple of Christ does so through apprenticeship.”³³ Discipleship is a process that is passed down person to person, life to life. Following in the footsteps of Christ is a beautiful yet overwhelming task. Our parishes must be ready to provide faithful and well-formed disciples who can guide kids along the way. Yet many Catholic churches find it difficult to find those amongst their flock who are equipped to play such a critical role.

Young Life is a recognized mission leader in the discipleship of teenagers. Because Young Life leaders know kids, spend time with kids, listen to kids and struggle through life with kids, they know the practical ins and outs of how life in Christ is lived out in the critical years of adolescence. Not only through formal teaching but more so in their lived witness, Young Life leaders offer vivid personal examples of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus today. As Pope John Paul II pointed out, those in contemporary society “listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”³⁴

Conclusion

For over 70 years, Young Life has been on the cutting edge of youth ministry, adapting to the ever-changing world of kids today. Through its commitment to Christ’s call and its pursuit of real relationships, Young Life has broken down barriers and befriended kids of all different types in the name of Jesus Christ – urban and suburban kids, Caucasian kids and kids of color, middle school and high school kids, college kids and kids in foreign countries, affluent and underprivileged kids, pregnant kids and kids with special needs. “Every kid” is Young Life’s motto, “everywhere.” Young Life leaders everywhere are willing to step out of their comfortable world and enter into the often-uncomfortable world of kids because we believe it will have an eternal impact for the kingdom of God.

³¹ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 2006, 38-39.

³² See the section on “Methodologies” in Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, *Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C., 2012.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa* (The Church in Europe), 49.

Young Life is excited to partner with Catholic churches everywhere to meet the increasingly complex demands of kids today. While endowed with a rich treasury of spiritual blessings, the Catholic Church struggles to hold the attention of its greatest hope for the future – young people. Research has shown and the Church has reiterated the need to call kids to conversion, to a relationship with Christ and to a life-long commitment to discipleship. Young Life leaders in every state are eager to share their wisdom, equip teams of local Catholics, and go out and do the work of discipleship together. The new evangelization is not a pipe dream. It is a reality to embrace and live into through the power of the Holy Spirit.

“The moment has come,” Pope John Paul II said, “to commit all of the Church’s energies to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*.”³⁵ Dynamic collaboration between Young Life and the Catholic Church not only represents a significant step toward fulfilling the Great Commission, but it also has the potential to showcase the depth, beauty and sophistication of the Catholic tradition to those outside its communion. While Young Life has the potential to help reanimate the core of the Christian faith for millions of Catholics around the world, non-Catholics within Young Life might also uncover the incredible depth of spiritual wisdom and blessing as they build relationships with their Catholic friends.

With roughly 5.6 billion people on our planet who are non-Christian or fully secularized, our task becomes more focused than ever. The time for partnership and sharing our gifts is now. A world of kids is waiting.

Our young people today are waiting, waiting for somebody to care about them like Christ did. I mean there are six or eight million in our nation that nobody has ever talked to about Jesus Christ, that nobody has ever said a prayer for, that nobody has ever cared about. There are millions of them in our own nation, and they are waiting for somebody to care about them enough to take the time and trouble to pour out compassion on them, to prove their friendship, to bridge this tragic and terrible gap that exists in our culture between teenagers and adults – to emulate the example of Jesus Christ.”³⁶

³⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio (Mission of the Redeemer)*, 3.

³⁶ Kit Sublett (ed.), *The Diaries of Jim Rayburn*, Colorado Springs, CO: Morningstar Press, 2008, xviii.