

# **A PASTORAL LETTER ON THE EVANGELIZATION OF YOUTH**

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***When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to Jesus, he said in a parable: "A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up.***

***Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture.***

***Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it.***

***Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold. "***

***As he said this, he called out, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"***

***Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. Jesus said,***

***"To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that 'looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.'***

***"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.***

***The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.***

***The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away.***

***As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.***

***But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance." (Luke 8:5-15)***

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## **The Evangelization of Youth**

1. Jesus uses ancient images in his Parable of the Sower. Yet they convey exactly the challenges of sowing the good seed of the Good News in the "post-modern" world.
2. Today's young people live in a world where the Word of God is often trampled or stolen from their hearts. Anxieties, riches and pleasures of life choke them. Yet the Word of God still manages to find good soil, take root, and produce mature fruit in the lives of many young people. We have seen it!
3. If we are to be realistic about evangelizing youth, the Church must look at those places where the Word is taking root and producing fruit among young people and then work tirelessly to duplicate these conditions. All members of Christ's Body in our local Church must examine areas where the Word is not taking root and then redouble their efforts to clear the land.
4. For two years, the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council has examined the task of evangelizing young people, studying the climate within the Church of Halifax and modern culture. Their conclusions can be summarized in terms of this parable: the sower, the seed, and the soil.

## **The Sower**

5. The whole Church is responsible for proclaiming the Word of God to young people. Every member of the Church—from the archbishop to priests and deacons, women and men religious and, most importantly, lay people young and old—must recognize the pressing need to evangelize youth. We should not approach the task of evangelization as hired hands, sowing the seed simply as a job, something that must get done. Rather we must think of evangelization as a farming family would prepare for spring seeding—such a family knows that its future livelihood and well-being depends on the growth of that seed.

*In July 2002, Pope John Paul II saw in the Toronto World Youth Day an occasion that would "mark a reawakening of pastoral attention to the young in Canada. May the enthusiasm of this moment be the spark that is needed to launch a new era of powerful witness to the gospel! ... My wish for all of you who are here is that the commitments you have made during these days of faith and celebration will bring forth abundant fruits of dedication and witness."*

6. Sowers of the seed must be true disciples of Christ who bring the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (cf. Galatians 5:22-23)—to their task. These qualities, which are not our doing but gifts of the Holy Spirit, will ensure that the Church's contacts with young people will be meaningful, respectful, and fruitful.

7. Evangelization is not just the sharing of information. Those who proclaim the Word of God must do so with their hearts and minds if that Word is to be received and welcomed. Those who desire to introduce young people to Jesus must first and foremost be genuine friends and models of Christian life.

8. We need to help young people know their place in the Church; and they need to know that the Church needs them to take that place. The Church must therefore support young people as their faith develops, so that the Word takes root and bears mature fruit. In short, the sower must care deeply about the harvest and work to ensure it is bountiful.

9. In practical terms, the Church must be prepared at every level—in the Parish, within the Archdiocese and even on the level of the universal Church—to invest the resources required to support faith development among our young people. We must rejoice with them when their lives change as a result of meeting the Risen Lord Jesus. Needless to say, significant amounts of time, talent and treasure are required for this vital enterprise to succeed.

### **The Seed**

10. Seeds must be carefully selected and adapted to grow in the specific climate where they're to be planted. In the same way, we must proclaim the Word of God to young people in a way that relates to their experience. This should include, but not be limited to, the use of appropriate music and media (including electronic media). The Word of God must be presented with a generous and wide appreciation for contemporary youth culture and attitudes.

11. Just as Christ proclaimed the Parable of the Sower to people who lived in a Mediterranean farming culture, we must present the truth of Christ to young people who inhabit a culture characterized by relativism and materialism—by the ideas that absolute truth does not exist and that only the material world counts.

12. The "seed" that adults share with youth needs to be founded on the whole truth as the Church presents it. Anything less will only confuse or mislead the young. This means that Church youth programs must include religious and moral education. We must also provide resources for those working with youth and continuing education opportunities for their parents and other adults.

13. The parish—or a group of collaborating parishes—must be able to provide not only "experiences" of support and community, but also the educational programs and solid content necessary for growth from the faith of a child to the faith of an adult. A catechized and committed adult will be equipped to answer the Second Vatican Council's universal call to holiness, and will accept the responsibilities of leadership and service in the Church.

14. A young person's life moves rapidly—not only from one stage of life to the next but also from one place to the next. Thus parishes and even dioceses need to be aware that their investments in youth may also, or even primarily, benefit other parishes or other dioceses. We should accept that young people may not remain attached to their present parish in the longer term, but may move to other parishes or liturgical centers for a variety of reasons: convenience, relationships with friends, a richer opportunity to grow in their relationship with Our Lord.

15. When interacting with young people and their culture, the Church must at all times proclaim the Gospel in a way in which it can be heard, understood and accepted. At the same time, the Word of God must always be experienced as profoundly *counter-cultural* and life-changing.

16. Now we want the Gospel and our youth work to be life-changing. But when we talk about being "counter-cultural" we need to be specific about which "culture" we are countering. Youth can get defensive about this. Indeed, young people sometimes grow tired of calls to be "counter-cultural" because they hear *adults* criticizing *their* culture (even if that is not what the adult intends).

*During his papacy, Pope John Paul II proclaimed close to two thousand saints and blessed. The late Holy Father believed that young adults today need heroes who were close to Christ and can point the way to such an intimate relationship. He gave us outstanding models of holiness and humanity in Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati and Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, the young Iroquois "Lily of the Mohawks". Other real role models that speak to the young people of today include Saints Therese of Lisieux, Gianna Beretta Molla and Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.*

17. When adults criticize the culture of death, materialism and sexual license—and call on young people to be “counter-cultural”—they need to let youth know they realize that young people themselves did not create this culture. It is a product in part of earlier generations, imposed upon today’s youth via the media, especially by those who produce the material on cable TV, and by the entertainment industry generally.

18. Once their elders acknowledge their role in allowing false anti-Gospel values of power and money culture to dominate and use the media, it becomes easier for youth to take a step back, think critically about the dominant culture and ask whether they want to buy into it.

## The Soil

19. The most diligent sowers and the hardiest seeds stand little chance of producing an abundant harvest if the soil is not prepared first. In the post-modern world there are numerous ways in which the Word of God is trampled on, eaten up, and even choked. That is why the Church, in carrying on the task of Christ the Sower, must work so hard to help young people to grow in faith and freedom.

20. The first place where the faith of young people is nurtured is the family. The Church must therefore protect vigorously the vocation of marriage and continually defend the sanctity of life. Encouragement and effective faith formation for parents and young couples are essential to preparing fruitful soil for the Word of God in the hearts of young people. Without reaching out and protecting the domestic Church, which is the family, the Church at every level will be beset with struggles.

21. Still, we cannot ignore the reality that many of today’s children and youth are growing up in a corrosive family environment where parents fail to provide the necessary witness, guidance, stability and family structure. Many of them have already or will experience the divorce of their parents. More and more “couples” are living together unmarried; some of tomorrow’s children will be the adopted or lab-created children of same-sex couples.

22. As well, a large percentage of our youth will live in a household where their parents do not regularly attend Sunday Mass. For an increasing number of young people the family is not a source of stability, affirmation, and religious education, and the Church has to be there for them. If the Church is not their “anchor” in the midst of family troubles, who or what will be?

23. After the family—with all its contemporary challenges—the next place where young people meet God, then, is the parish. Thus the parish must do all it can to provide fertile soil for young people. It must foster youth-to-youth relationships—positive peer pressure—and be a place of hospitality, affirmation and belonging, open to the presence and ideals of youth. We see this, especially, in the parishes that have welcomed LIFE TEEN. Whenever young people leave for adventures outside the parish or diocese—such as Steubenville East Conferences, World Youth Days, Catholic Christian Outreach events—the parish and diocese must find ways to welcome them back with open arms, to listen to their experiences and to foster continued growth from those experiences.

24. The central elements of World Youth Day have contributed greatly to effective pastoral ministry with young people and with young adults. These primary elements—Christ and the Holy Spirit, Sacred Scripture, catecheses, the Sacraments (especially Reconciliation and Eucharist), piety, devotion, the World Youth Day Cross, the saints, together with the moments of pilgrimage, the Youth Festival, social service projects, vocational discernment—must find a place in our pastoral efforts with young people.

25. The members of the parish must be authentic Christian witnesses to the young people they meet. They should be willing to affirm and accept the gifts young people offer the Church. In this context the parish must identify and develop youthful “sowers of the seed” who can reach out to their peers in school and at work. The parish must provide support and encouragement for these evangelists as they grow in their own life of discipleship. The Church can assist our young people to reverse the negative trends in family life by helping them gain the knowledge and skills to build a strong marriage, family, and a domestic church of their own some day.

26. Given the central importance of the parish in the evangelization of youth, the diocese must provide continued support to parishes. It must assist parishes in the development of young leaders who can carry on this mission among their peers. In

*"Think of the vast majority of dedicated and generous priests and religious whose only wish is to serve and do good! There are many priests, seminarians and consecrated persons here today; be close to them and support them! And if, in the depths of your hearts, you feel the same call to the priesthood or consecrated life, do not be afraid to follow Christ on the royal road of the cross! At difficult moments in the church's life, the pursuit of holiness becomes even more urgent." –Pope John Paul II, Closing Mass, Canadian WYD July 27, 2002.*

supporting parishes the diocese must provide both material resources and programs.

27. Diocesan programs must fill in the gaps for parishes with small numbers of young people, and provide these youth with opportunities to gather together and encourage one another. The diocese must continue to support and strengthen marriages and the family as much as possible.

### **Reaping a Bountiful Harvest**

28. Young people who are active in a faith community bring their unrestrained enthusiasm and contagious idealism. The whole Church will benefit, today and tomorrow, from the active involvement of the young. Our parishes and our diocesan Church are already experiencing new life and youthfulness as the recommendations from our diocesan pastoral plan 'Forward in Faith' are implemented. Now is the time to strengthen ministry to our young people, so that they will grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ and become more alive in His Church. They will, in their turn, share their new life with all of us.

29. Soon we will begin a new church year. Let us make it "The Year of Youth" in the Archdiocese of Halifax. Let us build on the momentum that has been gathering throughout our diocese in so many powerful ways. Let us carefully plant and tend the seed of God's Word in the hearts of our young people.

30. We will see the fruit in the lives of our young people as they take part in the life of the Church, live faithfully with attention to the Word of God in their lives, care for others, work for justice and peace, and plant the seeds of God's Word in their own culture.

31. Later this month, I will meet with our youth at the monthly Cornerstone session, and I will offer them a challenge—to nourish the seed that has been planted in their hearts, to grow strong as disciples of Jesus and to work with all of us to help build up the church in the world.

*"On the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ and you will find true life." —Pope Benedict XVI, Inaugural Mass, April 24, 2005*

### **The Sower and Today's Youth**

32. When it was proposed that the Parable of the Sower be the motif for this Pastoral Letter, I worried that it was 'too simple' and perhaps not appropriate for the world in which we live. But on closer examination, this parable is packed with marvelous truths—truths so important that Jesus felt He needed to take the disciples aside to explain the story to them in detail.

33. These truths are as fresh today as they were nearly two thousand years ago. Dangers abound. Temptations are everywhere. But God's Word is still offered to those of generous heart; still the seed grows in good soil and brings a harvest of peace, joy and hope.

34. After Jesus finished His explanation, he added, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!". How can we possibly close our ears to His message? Jesus himself has explained it—there is no reason why we shouldn't "get it." In closing I suggest we ask ourselves, "Do we get it?" Do we understand the irreplaceable role young people play in our Church? Do we accept our personal responsibility to draw them into its life?

35. For if we do "get it," the Church will welcome the future with open arms. We will have sown the seeds, and helped produce another generation of sowers.



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Feast of St. Therese of Lisieux  
Virgin, Youth, Doctor of the Church

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