

Pope Benedict's Guide to Youth Ministry

by Amy Welborn

Catholics fret about youth ministry. They worry about the kids and the young adults and how best to reach them and keep them and lure them back. Every few years a new wave of models and programs surges through the American Catholic landscape, promising new levels of "engagement" and "relevance."

Some of these efforts are probably effective, others are window-dressing, and still others are just more of the same, just with different slang.

Last week – as anyone who isn't totally dependent on the secular media (which barely covered it) is aware – more than a million Catholic teens and young adults, along with hundreds of clergy and religious, gathered in Madrid with the Holy Father for World Youth Day.

Anyone interested in the question of how to minister to young Catholics might want to set aside – just for a few minutes – all the expert advice you've bought and paid for over the years and watch and listen to what the Holy Father said during his time with these millions of young people. No charge.

1. Teach them who they are

Whenever the Holy Father speaks to young people, his words make clear how well he understands them. He may be a couple of generations older, but there are some things that don't change: young people are idealistic, energetic, seeking, and open to give and receive love.

"Youth, as I have said more than once, is the age when life discloses itself to us with all its rich possibilities, inspiring us to seek the lofty goals which give it meaning" ([Saturday visit](#) to the San José Foundation).

He then invites his young listeners to go deeper in their self-reflection: to acknowledge the root of that energy, life and love in God:

"Yes, dear friends, God loves us. This is the great truth of our life; it is what makes everything else meaningful. We are not the product of blind chance or absurdity; instead our life originates as part of a loving plan of God" ([Prayer vigil](#) Saturday night at Madrid's Cuatro Vientos Air Base).

2. Continually hold up Christ as the answer

It's not enough to assure young people that they are good, gifted and loved. Our identity doesn't stop there – it moves on to Christ who redeems us and brings us into the Divine

Heart, where we live and move in God's own truth, love and freedom. Pointing young people to Christ points them to their true selves as he [said at Saturday night's vigil](#):

"Deep in our hearts we yearn for what is grand and beautiful in life. Do not let your desires and aspirations dissipate, but ground them in Jesus Christ. He himself is the sure foundation, the point of reference, for building up your life."

And it is Christ as a Person – not an idea – who calls us:

"There are words which serve only to amuse, as fleeting as an empty breeze; others, to an extent, inform us; those of Jesus, on the other hand, must reach our hearts, take root and bloom there all our lives. If not, they remain empty and become ephemeral. They do not bring us to him and, as a result, Christ stays remote, just one voice among the many others around us which are so familiar. Furthermore, the Master who speaks teaches, not something learned from others, but that which he himself is, the only one who truly knows the path of man towards God, because he is the one who opened it up for us, he made it so that we might have authentic lives, lives which are always worth living, in every circumstance, and which not even death can destroy" ([Thursday's welcome ceremony](#) at the Plaza de Cibeles in Madrid).

3. Seeking Christ? He gave us the Church so we can find Him

It's not enough to encourage young people to just "seek Christ," or to leave with them with the notion that all they need on this search is their own heart. As the Holy Father has pointed out in many contexts, [including his homily](#) at Sunday's Mass – which included the Gospel in which Jesus gave Peter the keys – that is not the Way Christ has set out for us:

"Make Christ, the Son of God, the centre of your life. But let me also remind you that following Jesus in faith means walking at his side in the communion of the Church. We cannot follow Jesus on our own. Anyone who would be tempted to do so 'on his own,' or to approach the life of faith with that kind of individualism so prevalent today, will risk never truly encountering Jesus, or will end up following a counterfeit Jesus."

4. The Way of the Christian is the Way of the Cross.

Young people know suffering. Those of us who minister to them have a profound responsibility to teach them *how* to suffer and what place suffering has in the life of a Christian. The Stations of the Cross are always an important WYD event, and Pope Benedict [invited the young people](#) who participated to bring the Cross into their lives:

"Let us eagerly welcome these teachings and put them into practice. Let us look upon Christ, hanging on the harsh wood of the Cross, and let us ask him to teach us this mysterious wisdom of the Cross, by which man lives. The Cross was not a sign of failure, but an expression of self-giving in love that extends even to the supreme sacrifice of one's life."

5. Go Out to All Nations

It is tempting for youth ministry to fall into a pandering trap, treating young people as creatures who must be entertained and affirmed, rather than as human beings who are coming awake to the call of God in their hearts – a call that invites them to love radically and fully. We forget how many of the martyrs of the early Church were children and teenagers. Pope Benedict doesn't. Every talk he gave at World Youth Day focused in some way on [challenging his young listeners](#) to see themselves as missionaries:

"Dear friends: be prudent and wise, build your lives upon the firm foundation which is Christ. This wisdom and prudence will guide your steps, nothing will make you fear and peace will reign in your hearts. Then you will be blessed and happy and your happiness will influence others. They will wonder what the secret of your life is and they will discover that the rock which underpins the entire building and upon which rests your whole existence is the very person of Christ, your friend, brother and Lord, the Son of God incarnate, who gives meaning to all the universe."

In the [closing ceremony](#), he ended this challenge with a question:

"Your friends will want to know how you have changed after being in this lovely city with the Pope and with hundreds of thousands of other young people from around the world. What are you going to tell them?"

In the end, what the Holy Father calls us to – as young people and as those who care for them – is trust. To trust God's love and care for us. To trust that Christ is the Son of God and that the Church is His Body. To trust that the source of young people's – and our – aspirations and energy is the Spirit. To trust the call to follow Christ and listen to Him always, even – or especially – in suffering. To trust, and – as the Holy Father says again and again – to respond. To trust that when we are in Christ, we are really and truly free.

"As you return home, take back with you the good news of Christ's love which we have experienced in these unforgettable days. Fix your eyes upon him, deepen your knowledge of the Gospel and bring forth abundant fruit!" ([Sunday morning Angelus](#), closing ceremony).

Amy Welborn is a freelance writer. Her blog is located at <http://amywelborn.wordpress.com>, and she is the author of 19 books including [Come Meet Jesus: An Invitation from Pope Benedict XVI](#) published by Word Among Us Press in 2010.
