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How can Catholic youth programs improve the youth's connection to the Mass?

By Elizabeth Cook

A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology and Seminary of Saint John's University,
Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in
Theology with a Concentration in Liturgy

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND SEMINARY

Saint John's University Collegeville, Minnesota

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This paper was written under the direction of

Jeffrey Kaster

How can Catholic youth programs improve the youth's connection to the Mass?

Description: This paper was written for the Youth and Young Adult Ministry class under the direction of Jeffrey Kaster in the Fall of 2017. The assignment was to design a written project to analyze a situation in a youth or young adult ministry setting and create a pastoral response. The paper developed the question and response using four distinct steps based on Osmer's tasks of theological interpretation: 1) Descriptive Task (what is the problem?); 2) Interpretive Task (why is this happening?) 3) Theological Interpretation (what should be happening? 4) Pastoral response (what should we do?)

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Elizabeth Cook

Section 1: What is Happening with the youth's connection to the Mass?

There is a saying that goes, “ignorance is bliss.” However, regarding the Mass and inheritance of eternal life, ignorance could be death. We are called to “full, active, and conscious participation,” in the liturgy, and if we do not involve ourselves whole-heartedly, we run the risk of spiritual death.¹ In considering the high-school aged youth of our parishes, there is a general understanding that more and more youth are leaving the church. The reason for this is unclear, however there is a general trend of dissatisfaction and a lack of feeling connected to the church and the community. This paper will seek to discover how youth ministry programs can help their youth foster a deeper engagement in the Mass. The community of my parish of Blessed Trinity in Ocala, Florida will serve as the test subject. Other research methods will be examined such as Social Learning Theory, a scriptural exegesis and application from the book of Nehemiah, and scriptural and liturgical catechesis about Christian worship and the Mass.

There is a clear trend that people are leaving the church. One statistic from a PEW Research center report in 2015 states that only 27% of Millennials say they attend religious services on a weekly basis, compared with 51% of adults in the Silent Generation (born 1928-1945), or even 34% in Generation X (born 1965-1980).² Tracing this issue back to the source, one finds that the problem of a decreased attendance of youth in the church may be with a lack of engagement of the youth in the Mass and/or the church community. When another PEW study asked their subjects why they left Catholicism, most former Catholics (71% now unaffiliated, 54% converted to Protestantism) say they “gradually drifted away” from Catholicism.³ Others give

¹ Paul IV, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1963), [41], accessed November 15, 2017. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

² “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” PEW Research Center, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/> (September 11, 2017).

³ “Leaving Catholicism,” PEW Research Center, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/04/27/faith-in-flux3/> (September 11, 2017).

reasons that include dissatisfaction with teachings about the Bible and disagreement with church doctrine. Among the reasons for dissatisfaction and leaving the church, the concern here is the type that originates from a deficiency of catechesis. For many people, their catechesis stops after Confirmation. However, just as faith is a lifelong commitment, so too must learning be.

To find out more about youth ministry curricula and the success of youth group programs, I talked to six youth ministers from different parishes, four teens that were actively involved in Mass and attended the Life Nights at Blessed Trinity, and an adult CORE volunteer at Blessed Trinity. I first asked the youth ministers about curricula. The hypothesis was that a lectionary-based curriculum would be the most effective in developing a deeper connection to the Mass. I asked, “do you use a lectionary-based curriculum for your youth nights, or do you know of one?” Most of the responses I received either included that they did not use or know of one, some made up their own curriculum to focus on the Sunday lectionary, or some knew of one but did not use it. A suggestion from the youth minister at Blessed Trinity as the main lectionary-based curriculum was “Summit” by LifeTeen. It includes a theme for the weekend, the readings, key words and themes, game ideas, and walks the student through a lectio divina. There is also a closing challenge for the teens each week. While this curriculum seems best used for a bible study or a more intimate setting, it could be adapted to fit a larger group. The consensus from the youth ministers for any discussed curriculum was that no curriculum is perfect; each one needs to be adapted in some way.

One youth minister from a different parish that I spoke to had the strongest semblance of a lectionary-based curriculum out of the other five. He would look at the readings for the weekend, pick out a theme, and then either try to find a LifeNight or something with Youth Ministry Access that would line up with the theme, or he would make up his own event. His youth events

happened right after a Mass, and depending on the priest's homily he would edit his talk or the lesson right before the meeting based on what the students experienced at the Mass. I asked him if he felt that his curriculum inspired more Mass-related questions or introspective connections from his students, to which he replied, "No... most teens are not extremely self-reflective or thinking at that level right now." He also does not recall any youth ever coming up to him a few years later saying, "I get ____ now!" or something similar. He found that the youth had many questions when the new Mass translations came out, but nothing else came to mind.

Next, I spoke with four teens that attend Blessed Trinity about their Mass and LifeNight experiences. My first question to them was, "Can you sum up what the Mass means to you in a couple sentences?" Three of the teens focused on the community/worship element, while one teen said it was her "closest connection with God." I asked them if they ever had any questions that arose during the Mass about the Mass, homily, or something that happened during Mass, and if they feel they were sufficiently answered. Two answered, "no, not really, I've never thought of that." One answered, "yes, but they don't get answered and it really doesn't matter." And one answered, "yes, and it's about half and half they get answered by my parents or they get answered at the LifeNight." I asked them if they felt any connection between the Mass that day and the following LifeNight, and the consensus was "no." One teen, in answering my question, focused on the community aspect. He said the Mass was about getting together as a community, and then the LifeNight was another branch of that community. Finally, I asked them if there was anything they would like to see more of from the LifeNights, and three said "no," while one said that she would like to see more of the Mass in the LifeNight. Last spring, the previous youth director did a semester on the Mass. I asked one teen if that curriculum helped her find a deeper connection to the Mass, to which she said, "I really don't remember a lot about it."

I also spoke to a CORE team member that has volunteered for many years at Blessed Trinity. I asked her if she felt that the LifeNights had any connection to the Mass, to which she replied, “No, but is it necessary? What is important is that we make a connection to the youth and their lives, and right now with the way our priests preach their homilies that is not happening at the LifeTeen Mass.” She wishes that the priests would edit their homilies to be more on the level with the teens at the designated “LifeTeen Mass,” but it does not seem that that will happen in the near future.

Finally, I spoke with the new Director of Youth Ministry at Blessed Trinity about her future plans for Blessed Trinity’s LifeTeen program. She agreed that there was not a lot of congruency between the Mass and the following LifeNight, so she plans to integrate Summit into her curriculum. She has also started a Tuesday night bible study where they will focus on one of the Sunday readings, discuss the others, and she plans to read the Opening Collect and the Prayer after Communion, “so they can at least hear it one extra time before the priest says it.” The bible study has had a weak start, but she hopes that it will pick up. LifeTeen also has a Liturgy Planning Guide that she intends to use. Our new youth director seems more liturgically minded, and this semester her LifeNights are focusing on Scripture. I have more confidence in the structure of the upcoming youth group events and I hope that she facilitates a stronger desire for deeper knowledge about the Mass.

The liturgy and the Mass are crucial in that they are the medium to a personal encounter with Christ. As a liturgist, I have studied the inner and outer workings of the liturgy, and I feel that I am blessed to be able to see more of the bigger and whole picture than the weekly church-goer. I wish that more people would be aware of the intimate functions of the liturgy, i.e. how the prayers are meticulously crafted according to the readings, or how the yearly cycles connect and

grow in a way only God could have designed. I feel such a deeper connection and passion about the Mass after my studies, and wish that I knew what I know now at a much younger age. I believe and hope that knowledge of why the Mass is structured in its way and what each part means, coupled with a deeper knowledge of the scriptures and Lectionary, will help teens further engage in the Mass. This will lead to an ownership of their faith and increased intentional participation. We are called to achieve full, active, and conscious participation in the Mass, and to do so one must be exposed and open to the knowledge that the Mass has to offer. It is our job as catechists and liturgists to provide that knowledge to the parents and teens of our church community. A lectionary-based curriculum will focus on these elements and provide a stronger connection to the student's life and the Mass. There can be a disconnect between the programs that have topical curricula when the youth night is after the Mass. In my experience volunteering at LifeNights, most of the time there is no connection between the beauty of what just happened at the Mass and what they talk about at the youth group event. There is usually no opportunity to answer questions or recap what happened during the Mass, and therefore curiosity fades away and disinterest grows. It is the student's responsibility to be engaged in the Mass, but our responsibility as catechists to provide them with the knowledge to give them the ability to be consciously involved.

Because there seems to be a trend of a loss in faith during the adolescent and early young adult years, we need to create programs that are targeted to those years that sustain and deepen their faith. Pope Francis at World Youth Day 2017 said, "Like the young woman of Nazareth, you can improve the world and leave an imprint that makes a mark on history, your history and

that of many others... The Church and society need you.”⁴ If the youth leave the church, then their children will most likely not be involved in the church in the future. To be fully, actively, and consciously involved in the Mass, one needs to be informed, challenged, and uplifted. How can Blessed Trinity improve their LifeNight curriculums and high-school catechesis to foster engagement, knowledge, and give our youth purpose for attending Mass?

Section 2: Why is this happening?

As previously mentioned, many youth are leaving the church because they either gradually drift away or are dissatisfied with church doctrine. Typically one does not make this decision alone. One factor of a high-schooler’s involvement in the Mass can be attributed to the influence of what their friends or parents are encouraging. Because of this, social learning theory will help to unveil more ways to keep youth engaged and passionate about the Mass. Social learning theory explains socialization and its effects on the individual.⁵ It integrates cognitive learning theory, which states that learning is influenced by psychological factors, and behavioral learning theory, which implies that one learns in response to environmental stimuli.⁶ In 1977, A psychologist, Albert Bandura, conducted an experiment where children observed how adults treated a toy doll.⁷ When the children played with the doll, Bandura discovered that they modeled the adults and behaved in a similar fashion, whether positively or negatively, towards

⁴ “The Church and society need you, Pope Francis tells youth,” Catholic News Agency, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/the-church-and-society-need-you-pope-francis-tells-youth-24337/> (September 11, 2017).

⁵ Ashley Crossman, "How Social Learning Theory Explains Society’s Effect on Identity," ThoughtCo, accessed October 04, 2017, <https://www.thoughtco.com/social-learning-theory-definition-3026629>.

⁶ "Social Learning Theory," Psychology Today, accessed October 04, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/social-learning-theory>.

⁷ Saul McLeod, “Bandura- Social Learning Theory,” SimplyPsychology, accessed November 26, 2017, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/bandura.html>

the doll.⁸ Therefore, social learning theory suggests that youth will model and learn from their environment and the mentors around them.

Social learning theory has three main influences to achieve a desired behavior in the subject: frequent reinforcement of the behavior with low punishment, mentality that is favorable toward the behavior, and imitation of models or mentors.⁹ Rather than positive or negative reinforcement as the mechanism toward encouraging the correct behavior, the observation of other people has the greater power of motivation.¹⁰ Bandura points out that there are four components to social learning theory: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.¹¹ The subject must be focused on the behavior, they must be able to recall the information, they must be able to reproduce previously learned information, and they must be motivated to behave in the desired way.¹² In short, students will learn and behave like those around them, especially if they see positive reinforcement.

Transferring social learning theory to the research question will highlight the environment of the students as the main influence for positive learning. A successful curriculum and environment will produce engaged, passionate, knowledgeable, focused students that desire to attend and participate in Mass. If they see their peers or mentors around them intentionally involved in the Mass and that their lives are changed because of it, they may be inspired to discover what makes their friends behave the way they do. In this way the LifeNights are crucial

⁸ "Social Learning Theory," Psychology Today, accessed October 04, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/social-learning-theory>.

⁹ Ashley Crossman, "How Social Learning Theory Explains Society's Effect on Identity," ThoughtCo, accessed October 04, 2017, <https://www.thoughtco.com/social-learning-theory-definition-3026629>.

¹⁰ "Social Learning Theory," What is Social Learning Theory?, accessed October 04, 2017, <https://explorable.com/social-learning-theory>.

¹¹ TeachThought Staff, "Bandura's 4 Principles Of Social Learning Theory," TeachThought, September 03, 2017, accessed October 04, 2017, <https://www.teachthought.com/learning/principles-of-social-learning-theory/>.

¹² TeachThought Staff, "Bandura's 4 Principles Of Social Learning Theory," TeachThought, September 03, 2017, accessed October 04, 2017, <https://www.teachthought.com/learning/principles-of-social-learning-theory/>.

because they should provide an oasis for the teens from the tumult of their week outside of the church. A youth director must create a warm, welcoming, positive environment, where the teen knows they are safe, respected, and loved. The CORE team and the youth attending must be focused, respectful, and speak about their love for the Lord and Mass to each other truthfully and often. In this way, by positively reinforcing LifeNight attendance, believing that the Mass and LifeNights are beneficial to attend and learn from, and seeing that peers and role models have a desire to invest time and energy into these events, one will develop a yearning for more for themselves.

Understanding and looking at this research question through the lens of social learning theory recalls the comment the CORE member made during her interview. Is it the curriculum that makes an impact in the lives of youth, or is it the connection? Considering social learning theory, one would deduce that the environment and the people surrounding the students will influence them and make the difference rather than pushing book-knowledge. In addition, to transfer this on a church-wide scale, creating an environment and a way of life that is positive and welcoming will encourage and inspire people to come to church, worship, make lasting friendships, and continue to come back to church. As a liturgist, one who enjoys reading church documents and researching liturgical catechesis, I must realize that some people do not connect to the Mass in the same way I do. It is not just knowledge or information that will make people come to Mass. The atmosphere and the personal connections created through the church community give the church, and youth programs, life and spirit. It is in this way that the student can be open to learning more about their faith and make a deeper connection with the Mass.

Pastoral Solutions to the Question in Light of Social Learning Theory

- Create a positive, welcoming environment at Mass and LifeNights.

- Support and praise students for attending Mass and LifeNights, especially if of their own free will.
- Involve passionate, dedicated, faithful CORE members who will interact positively and transparently with the students. Encourage a mind of discipleship, not discipline.

Relational ministry is tantamount to achieving a successful youth program.

Section 3: What should be happening? Using Scripture exegesis as a model for worship and Theological Interpretation

Nehemiah 9:1-38:

1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. 2 And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the Lord their God. . . .

32 “Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. 33 Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. 34 Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. 35 Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. 36 Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. 37 And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.

38 “Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.

This passage from Nehemiah demonstrates many aspects about our faith, including how to worship, theology about God, lessons about forgiveness, and the importance of scripture.

These verses are filled with repentance, praise, mourning, and the power of the Lord. Because of this, we can look to him for guidance on proper forms and rites of worship. The *Oxford Bible*

Commentary describes Nehemiah’s writing style as “official” in his method and attitude.¹³ He focuses on the physical aspects of the faith and traditions.¹⁴ Nehemiah shows that there must be several components for proper worship. First, there must be a gathering of people open to God’s grace and mercy. Verse 1 says, “the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads.”¹⁵ They must come spiritually and physically prepared for worship. Second, there will be a time of listening to the Word of the Lord. “they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God, for a fourth of the day...”¹⁶ Finally, there is a time of praise, where the people are called to “Arise!” and “bless the Lord, your God, from eternity to eternity!”¹⁷ This balance begins with a time of confession and repentance, opening their hearts and minds to what God has in store for them, and then finally rejoicing in the grace and forgiveness of God as they remember His covenant and His desire to have a relationship with His people.

Many of the traditions outlined in this section parallel the Catholic church’s rites and customs today. In verses 1-3, the people gather and first proclaim their sins and iniquities, just like the Mass begins with the Confiteor. In this time of worship in Nehemiah, half of this time was spent reading from the “law of the Lord,” and the other half was spent confessing their sins.¹⁸ The English Standard Version, New International Version, and New American Bible Revised Edition translations differ on exactly how much of the day was spent doing this, but all translations agree on the 50/50 division between reading and confession. Similarly, our Mass spends about half the time meditating on the word of the Lord, and half the time rejoicing and

¹³ John Barton and John Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 309.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Nehemiah 9:1 (ESV)

¹⁶ Nehemiah 9:3 (NABRE)

¹⁷ Nehemiah 9:5 (NIV)

¹⁸ Nehemiah 9:3 (ESV)

commemorating Jesus' resurrection and the forgiveness of our sins. Next, the people were called to "arise!" to bless the Lord, their Creator, and to recall His wonderful deeds.¹⁹ We stand in the same way to begin Mass, welcome the Gospel, and celebrate the Eucharist. Additional parallels to our faith include when Nehemiah recants how God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai.²⁰ Just as God came down to Moses, He now descends to us in the sacraments.²¹ Next, Nehemiah tells of how God "made known to them the Holy Sabbath," and gave his people, "commandments, statues, and law[s]."²² In our time today we are taught to keep the Sabbath day holy and to follow the Ten Commandments. Mentioning the people's hunger and thirst highlights God's provision, and especially how He provides for His chosen ones.²³ The "manna" that God gave them from Heaven, He now gives to us in the Eucharist.²⁴ The next section of Nehemiah 9:16-31 highlights the iniquities of God's people, which in turn elevates God's mercy and forgiveness. God gave us the Holy Spirit to instruct us, and even though man continues to turn from God (a theme applicable in modern time as well), God shows eternal mercy and forbearance.²⁵ Nehemiah acknowledges the justice of God, and in our time we can be assured of our salvation and forgiveness.²⁶

This passage outlines a model for our worship and relationship with God. It appears that many of the rubrics outlined in Nehemiah are still followed today, however it is questionable if the congregational involvement is present at the same level. Many youth attend Mass because

¹⁹ Nehemiah 9:6-15 (ESV)

²⁰ Nehemiah 9:13 (ESV)

²¹ Loring Woart Batten, "A Commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah", (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004), 366.

²² Nehemiah 9:14 (NABRE) and Simon Patrick, *A commentary upon the two books of Chronicles: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (London, Rose and Crown, 1706), 634.

²³ John Barton and John Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 321.

²⁴ Loring Woart Batten, "A Commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah", (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004), 367.

²⁵ Loring Woart Batten, "A Commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah", (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004), 370.

²⁶ Simon Patrick, *A commentary upon the two books of Chronicles: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (London, Rose and Crown, 1706), 640.

they are required to or because their parents bring them. A recent informal survey at the Catholic high school in Ocala revealed that most of the high schoolers there define a “practicing Catholic” as one who attends Mass at least *once a month*. Nehemiah shows that there is so much more to worship than blank attendance. Youth can use this passage to find a blueprint for worship and a deeper connection to the Mass as they realize the link to their ancestors. God promised prosperity to Abraham and his descendants, and we are included in that number. The Mass is not just something one “goes to,” but it is a timeless tradition passed on from our forefathers. The youth can find comfort from this passage knowing that no matter how much they have sinned, God will never abandon them. He is always there for us, especially when we gather together for worship. Just as God gave the Israelites manna and water in the desert, He will always provide for us today in the Word and in the Eucharist.²⁷

Theological Interpretation: “Ite, Missa Est: We are sent”

“Ite Missa Est,” three short words that carry a powerful impact and initiative. There have been multiple suggestions of the translation of this phrase, including “Go, the church has been sent,”²⁸ “Go, you may depart,”²⁹ or, “Go, now is the collection of alms.”³⁰ Also, the word “Missa,” has ties to the word “*missio*,” the root of the English word “mission.”³¹ Additionally, once the new rites were instituted, deacons were given other options for a dismissal, including “Go forth, the Mass is ended,” “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord,” “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life,” and “Go in peace.”³² This phrase has transitioned into a meaning of mission. The church is uplifted and filled during the Mass, and now that it has ended,

²⁷ Nehemiah 9:15 (ESV)

²⁸ USCCB, “Concluding Rites.”

²⁹ Zacharias Ursinius, *Commentary of dr. zacharias ursinus on the heidelberg catechism*, (Rarebooksclub.com, 2012), 418.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ USCCB, “Concluding Rites.”

³² Edward Foley, “The Concluding Rites”, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2011), 625.

the people are urged forth “so that each may go back to doing good works, praising and blessing God.”³³ Other ancient rituals support the idea that the Mass does not end, but continues. One early practice included ministers going to the sacristy after Mass to continue praying.³⁴ Additionally, the sign of the cross is a powerful symbol of an end and a beginning. Just as the faithful mark themselves with the sign of the cross at the beginning of Mass to symbolize their faith and identity as a community in Christ, the sign of the cross at the end of Mass reinforces this identity that the community now carries out into the world.³⁵ The assembly accepts the task of mission with a resounding “amen,” and “thanks be to God!” This final “Deo Gratias” expresses the same sentiments of thanksgiving as the Eucharist, and the community responds with an act of thanks and joy as they take the joy from the sacrament of the Mass out into the secular world.

With respect to youth ministry, it is the responsibility of the youth ministers to encourage and catechize the youth with the mindset that the Mass does not end when one leaves the church. It is important to keep the “fire” alive in the youth and to allow them time to process what occurred at the Mass, answer any questions that they may have, and remind them of the connection of the Mass to their daily lives. This is especially crucial in youth programs that have their youth nights immediately after church. One perspective of youth education suggests that youth resonate best with *passion-based learning*, a method that connects their individual passions with the subject matter.³⁶ If the same method is applied with youth catechesis to make a connection between their daily lives and the Mass, the youth will hopefully develop a deeper

³³ Catholic Church, and International Committee on English in the Liturgy, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003), 90.

³⁴ Edward Foley, “The Concluding Rites”, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2011), 629

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 636.

³⁶ Jeffrey Kaster, *Youth Ministry*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016), 20.

engagement to the Mass. Additionally, according to Fowler's *Stages of Faith*, as the teen's life is pulled in the many directions of family, school, peer pressure, and social media, faith must find a place in the mix.³⁷ Youth ministers can help faith become the teen's identity rather than a hobby. Fowler mentions that at this stage the youth do not always have the opportunity to "reflect on or examine" their beliefs and values in a productive way.³⁸ The Mass is a wonderful time to rest in the peace of God, meditate on His teachings, and process one's place in their faith and the Mass. As the youth are sent out by the commission, "Ite Missa Est," the youth night that follows also has the power to synthesize the insights from the Mass and support them with theology and catechesis. Seeing the youth as disciples, empowered by Christ in the Mass, one will be led to supply the youth with the tools they need on their missionary journey. This includes knowledge of scripture, the sacraments, the Trinity, and other key formational and foundational areas. The Mass contains all this knowledge and more, and is a powerful tool to teach the youth about their faith and how to be disciples of Christ.

**Pastoral Responses to engaging the Youth in the Mass
considering Nehemiah and "Ite Missa Est"**

- Select a curriculum that focuses on teaching about and the importance of worship and the Mass, with direct applications to the teen's lives.
- Select a curriculum that includes concrete ways that the students can live out their commission to be "sent."

³⁷ Joann Wolski Conn, *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 226-232.

³⁸ Ibid.

- Catechize the youth with the mindset that the Mass does not end when one leaves the church, and find ways that the youth group can live out their call to discipleship. Remind them that they must be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit at Mass to do so.

Section 4: The Response

As Catholics, we are called to “full, active, and conscious participation,” in the Mass.³⁹ However, one cannot achieve that level of involvement without the proper tools to do so. With respect to students of the high-school age, it is the job of the youth director and catechists to provide the youth and their parents with the resources to engage in the Mass, and then take that drive out into the world. The first hypothesis of this project was that a lectionary-based curriculum would be the best way to provide students with a connection between what they experience in the Mass and their youth-group events. However, after interviewing several members of the Blessed Trinity community and others, applying Social Learning Theory, and using scripture exegesis and the commission, “Ite Missa Est,” it became apparent that the personal connections between the teen, CORE team and their relationship with the Trinity, rather than exclusive book-knowledge, is key in fostering the student’s interest in and connection to the Mass.

Social Learning Theory asserts that the environment and the personal influences around the youth will inspire a positive attitude toward the Mass. If the youth feels they are in a positive, encouraging, comfortable, safe environment, and they see others around them positively affected by their youth ministry experience and participation in the Mass, then they will also be led to

³⁹ Paul IV, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1963), [41], accessed November 15, 2017. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

follow in a similar behavior. It is the duty of the youth ministry program and the Mass to recruit faith-filled, discipleship-oriented CORE members that are willing to be mentors to the youth, and the youth director must work to provide a welcoming atmosphere that positively reinforces the behavior of attending Mass and youth group.

Nehemiah 9:1-38 outlines a model for worship. One learns the importance of community, reconciliation, praise, adoration, and petition, and realizes that God always provides for those that call on Him. Youth can use this passage as a model for worship, develop a deeper connection to God, and realize the ancestral history of the Mass. God's mercy is boundless and He will always provide for us in His Word and the Eucharist. In turn, after receiving the gift of worship and the sacrament of the Eucharist, we are called to respond in an act of thanksgiving, and are "sent out" to make God's kingdom come, "on earth as it is in Heaven."⁴⁰ The Mass does not end when we receive the final blessing; we have been given the Great Commission by Christ to go forth into the world as His disciples. As the youth learn that the Mass is not just something they "go to," they will develop ownership in the Mass, their faith, and their apostolic actions in their daily lives. The Mass is crucial in filling up the faithful with the Word and grace of God to help them get through the trials of life, and the Holy Spirit follows them out into the world. Knowing that every person has a part in the Mass and is Jesus' disciple, one will find purpose in attending Mass and participating in church life, including youth group events and other ministries. In conclusion, a positive environment for the youth, compassionate and engaging CORE members, and curriculum that includes the importance of worship will be crucial in developing a successful youth program to help students connect to the Mass.

⁴⁰USCCB, "Prayers of the Rosary."

Reviewing the pastoral responses from Social Learning Theory, scripture exegesis from Nehemiah, and the great sending, “Ite Missa Est,” one will realize the importance of creating a positive environment for the youth, providing solid role models, and offering a curriculum that connects the Mass to the teen’s daily lives and engages them as missionary disciples. However, a curriculum is not the only solution to inspiring teens to find a deeper connection to the Mass. While scripture provides some answers, and the liturgy others, the environment and adult volunteers will have the greatest impact on the youth. In Mark Yaconelli’s book, a youth shares similar sentiments. He says,

Young people just can’t have somebody reciting lines or reading a book or teaching. You want someone who’s learning, someone who’s alive and growing with you... it doesn’t work if that adult is at the end of the journey tugging on a rope trying to get you to come along... A young person needs to see that you’re vulnerable- that you’re struggling too.⁴¹

Seeing the youth as disciples, empowered by Christ, partaking in the same journey as themselves, a CORE member will seek to mentor them transparently and positively. It is crucial to not just impart catechesis on the youth, but to also create in them a desire to have a personal relationship with Jesus. If this relationship is not felt, the faith will quickly disintegrate and the youth will drift away from the church. In my experience, it is easy for a program to fall into a routine, using some sort of “cookie-cutter method” to operate the program. Keeping the youth program centered around the Mass and the Liturgy, which is a living, breathing, ever-changing system, one will continually be inspired and driven to find new ways to share the same information to the youth.

Plan to Integrate Pastoral Response

To facilitate a successful youth group event with emphasis on the Mass, the night must include a positive, welcoming environment, directed discussion about the previous Mass, some

⁴¹ Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006), 18.

type of connection to the Mass, and a discipleship-oriented challenge for the week. Additionally, material must be sent home to the parents on a weekly basis summarizing what transpired at the event and how they can integrate the lessons into their family life. To encourage a positive, welcoming environment, different CORE members must be delegated with the tasks of hospitality at the Mass before the youth event, and someone must have the task of environment at the youth event. The CORE members cannot stay on the sidelines, but must integrate into the youth, investing time and energy getting to know them. They must positively reinforce good behavior like attending Mass and youth group and participating in ministries outside of their normal expectations. If the current CORE team does not currently function in this way, then a retreat or meetings must be held to train the CORE team appropriately. Next, the youth director will plan a curriculum with components that include reviewing highlights from the previous Mass and allowing time for reflection and any questions the youth may have. For example, if the youth night involves time for dinner, there will be intentional discussion questions about the previous Mass that the CORE member at each table would facilitate. After dinner, as the group gathers together, the youth director will summarize a few points or ask for a highlight from each table. As the weeks go on, the youth director will keep track of these points and review the thoughts monthly. Next, a connection to the Mass will be included in the “talk section” of the night. Additionally, at the end of the night, the youth director will supply the youth with one concrete act of discipleship or goal that the youth can apply during the week. Challenges will be set in place (for example, take a picture of your act of discipleship, or write up your experience about it), and prizes handed out during the following LifeNight to positively reinforce the involvement of the youth in their communities outside of the LifeNight. Finally, there will be extra activities like retreats specifically for the CORE team, retreats for the youth, and times to

provide a personal encounter with Jesus. The connection to the Mass and the Eucharist are meaningless if an encounter and relationship with Christ does not precede it. Adoration and different forms of meditation will assist the youth in engaging in their spirituality and community, always including time for personal and group reflection. In turn they will take these experiences and connect them to the Mass.

Making changes to a program and a CORE team's mentality and the usual flow will certainly take time. Within the first few youth nights, the youth director should be able to integrate a few minutes into the LifeNight to discuss the Mass and set a goal for the week. Within the first six months, a retreat specifically for the CORE must be organized that will outline how to be positive, encouraging role models for the youth while working on their own spirituality and changes. At the end of the year, the youth director will follow up with the youth with an evaluation form, synthesize the data, and take the results to the CORE team to improve for the next year.

As stated previously, it is very easy to fall into a "cookie-cutter" habit and run the youth nights in a routine from week to week. Settling into a routine creates a stale "us and them" environment that is neither welcoming nor positive. Additionally, using a *passion-based* curriculum that will make a connection with the Mass to the teen's lives will create interest in the youth as they feel desired and loved. A curriculum like this in comparison to one that simply teaches information will be more successful. Finally, keeping the goals previously outlined at the forefront of everyone's mind will provide purpose and focus, rather than just wanting to "get through" the LifeNight. Over time, the youth group will grow, mature, and change together for the better, uniting everyone as disciples for Christ.

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