

“Toward a Pastoral Imagination for Remnant Youth Ministry”

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In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke wrote memorably about the importance of the moral imagination, a concept that he defined as “that which the heart owns, and which reason ratifies.” As Michael Miller of the Acton Institute notes of Burke, he had a deep respect for the fact that life is complex and deeply interconnected, that when we ignore this irreducible complexity and interconnectedness things go terribly wrong. One of the Revolution’s chief errors was its tendency toward hyper-rationalism, which produced what Miller calls “a constrained view of humanity.” It was an engineered ideal of the human person drawing on the Enlightenment and propagated through a heady, enthusiastic romanticism buttressed by a vague and then shockingly concrete threat of violence. But, it was an ideal that the heart could never own, that reason could not ratify— it was artifice that rhetoric and the guillotine would always need to enforce. Their moral imagination was not contoured to truth in its nuance and mystery. So when their rhetoric and hellish enthusiasm finally collided with an ancient truth, faithfully embodied, the backbone of their revolution was broken.

It is on the imagination and its role in youth formation that I would like to meditate. For clarity’s sake, I take the imagination to be that capacity of the soul to envision and to deploy hypothetically. The imagination is the ground out of which grows the tender shoots of plausibility that flower through habitual cultivation into confidence and thence certitude, to borrow that wondrous coinage from Newman. Imagination is that which comprehends the intersect between the intellect and the affections and prepares the produce of their labors for willful enactment. It is the place in the soul where the heart comes to own something and reason, such as it is, comes to ratify. That they must come out from their hobbit holes to meet one another gives to the imagination a conciliar quality. To observe and interact with the imagination obliges us to an aptitude for the paradoxical and the poetic, to become capable of contemplating story. For our purpose of invigorating youth formation, I want to propose first that a respect for the imagination means carefully attending to the *how* of our work among them in addition to the *what*. It means that formation cannot be reduced to a program, but must remain part of the mystery of interpersonal communion shared between Christians formed and forming. And it means that any properly catholic vision of adulthood must be that which the heart can own *and* reason can ratify, it must be the vision of a life worth living, handed from persons to persons.

Over the almost 20 years I’ve worked with youth, many things stand out about how we tend to build their imaginations.. I’d like to highlight a couple of insights from that meandering experience. The first concerns the habitat of youth ministry, and that the very place of a youth group can be problematic right from the get-go. On the one hand, a youth group helpfully concentrates a group of Christians with much in common both culturally and developmentally. This allows us to concentrate our attention to the needs we find there. On the other hand, youth groups create — mostly

inadvertently — a niche within a church that too often becomes its own auto-cephalous parish within the parish. Unlike a parish, though, youth groups necessarily ends when youth ends. I have often seen this be received by a young Christian as a kind of excommunication, simply because they have reached a certain age or grade in school. For the rest of the congregation, meanwhile the fact that their young people have existed in their own cloister by and large means that they have not grown in either aptitude or desire for interacting with young people on a habitual basis. We can see how the imagination conforms to a false idea of church. For the youth, Church exists until you get to a certain age. I believe this is why many youth leave church around the age of eighteen. Whatever ministry looks like to youth, then, we have to be careful about their integration with the rest of the parish. Their rules of prayer must be harmonious, we cannot constrain implausibly their vision of maturity by removing from their sight what maturity can look like.

My second observation is that the era of the youth program, as such, is dead. The young people with whom I have worked most recently seem consistently suspicious of being sold to, regardless of the product—but especially of Christian programs and products. The quick fix and “relevant” spiritualities that have sold them many exuberant camps and speakers and books have left them largely bereft of basic formation in prayer and repentance. They are keenly aware that far too often yesterday’s confident apologist is today’s deconstructing Christian. Young people also know they can get a better rock concert and pizza elsewhere than the youth group, minus the religious pitch. Besides this, they have retreated so far into their phones and virtual reality that even the thought of *going somewhere* has become strange. They are, as the pop star Lorde quipped “kind of over getting told to throw their hands up in the air.” They are resistant to any broadband attempt to get them to open up or to change their lives. But despite all of this, they will still tune in when they are personally addressed, when someone shows unique interest in them and will tell them the truth and sit in it with them. Programs can recruit one or two of our faculties, but to convert the whole person requires a whole person. The era of the personal, long-term, relational ask is not dead.

And so despite the challenges I do not despair. It helps me to remember that alongside their perennial impulse to rebel against the mores of their elders is the impulse to accept, in Joseph Campbell’s terms, the call of the mentor—to requite that archetypal longing we all have to be found by and to follow after the master. We all get that fuzzy feeling when Gandalf raises his substantial eyebrows and asks for a companion to go on an adventure. What I think they really want is to know what adulthood can look like. They want to know that their nascent calling into sainthood is real and worth the sacrifice. And they will know this by following someone who already knows and who is willing to come back for them and to walk the path with them. You would hardly believe the response I have seen when a formed Christian opens up a personal connection with them in a spirit of hospitality. It has a way of melting the ice of their jaded, weary, and skeptical predispositions. Remember, they are a mere demographic in the eyes of the world and far too many Christians. Billions of dollars are annually spent to incentivize their self-degradation through impulse and consumption. In their eyes is the fatigue of soul attending those who know they’ve been exploited. We cannot be another exploiter. A Christian, though, without an anxious neediness for an

immediate, positive reaction is, for them, a refreshing oddity. They will be curious, and curiosity will leave just enough room for wonder, and our Lord will meet them there.

This is why, I am persuaded, that if we want to get serious about ministering to young people, our highest priority must then be absorption in prayer, with an unflinching seriousness to our own pursuit of holiness. Youth can sense a fake a mile away. We have to be the real deal, striving always for that unconstrained humanity that is the property of a saint. That means everything the grown-ups in a parish do and are will shape and make more or less plausible the call to sainthood on our youngsters. The way we speak about and execute our duty to work and pray and give for the kingdom, the way we attend and are present to the Eucharist, the way we own our errors and repentance, and the way we treat our elders, our peers, our children, our enemies, the sick, the lost, and the obstinate—all of these shape the imagination for what they will perceive the Kingdom of God to be like. And if we constrain the vision through a misshapen faith and practice and manner of life, they will either rightly rebel against it or else adopt that constrained Christianity to our great shame as their mentors. This is the awesome work to which the Lord attached the danger of millstones and oceans. It will always be easier to stay safely in the realm of programmatic and the prosaic—much more difficult is the real work of apprenticed formation that calls upon them by way of placing a demand upon each of us, here and now. Youth ministry will always put tension and urgency upon faithful adult formation. Young adults too often rightly echo the lament of Ransom before the King and Queen of Perelandra: “I have never before seen a man or a woman!” But we can take heart that the ordinary faithfulness of a praying, imaginative, remnant Christian is a greater apologetic and evangelism is for young, watchful, eyes, enough of a vision of sainthood to keep them walking the path. After all, the shadow of a saint passing by can heal the sick. The simple silence of true holiness can still the spectacle and noise of the world. It can be the means of grace and conversion of a wayward, uncertain, or weary heart.

To close where we began on that awesome power of the imagination, remember that after all the programs borne of power and politics had failed to quell the terror, it was on July 17, 1794 that sixteen Carmelite nuns were tried and convicted by Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety as enemies of the state. In their habits they were carted to the plaza in Paris, quietly intoning the *Te Deum* as they did. As they were marched in file up the steps to the guillotine, they chanted Psalm 117 over and over, until the last of the sixteen had been executed. And then, as many observers would later note, the usually boisterous mob fell silent. And within ten days, the masterminds of their deaths fell by their own violent schemes. The song of the scaffold defeated the hideous strength of revolution, and and before the vision of that unconstrained humanity, in the presence of sixteen little saints, the great terror was ended.