

How Is Your Faith Expressed?

by Maura Thompson Hagarty

One day a journalist asked me about some teenagers from my parish who were spending vacation time collecting fruits and vegetables and distributing it to organizations that serve the poor.

"Aren't you amazed that *teens* are so willing to get sweaty and dirty laboring in the fields?" she asked.

"No," I responded. "The teenagers' service *inspired* me greatly, but it didn't *surprise* me."

The journalist's angle was astonishment that *teenagers* were sacrificing for others. She expected me, the parish's youth minister, to support her view. I couldn't do it. I *know* how capable teens are of responding to God's call to faithful living.

God's love and call to make Christ's presence known in the world inspire young Catholics all over the world to act. This article invites you to think about what God is asking of you and why—and then to explore ways Catholic youth put faith into action.

God Calling

Since, for Catholics, leading a life of faith means responding to a call from God, let's explore a concept that expresses this: *church*. The word *church* translates the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means "to call out of."

If you've had the experience of being called out of class by the principal for a school assembly, you have an idea of the meaning of this term. The Scriptures use *ekklesia* to refer to an assembly of people called together, usually for a religious purpose.

When the first Christians adopted the term to refer to themselves, they were saying that being called together by God is fundamental to their identity. It is who they are.

Today, who is the Church? You may sometimes hear people say that the youth are the future of the Church or that they are the Church of tomorrow. That's true.

Young people, however, are also the Church of *today*. God calls everyone, young and old. Age is not a determining factor.

To understand the purpose of the Church, it can be helpful to think of the Church as being more than what the eye can see. It has a visible or concrete part—the people, the teachings, places for worship, the actions of the community. It also has an invisible or spiritual part—the communion between people and God and the unity among people.

We often use images to shed light on things that are invisible—things that are real but can't be seen directly. Let's explore how the image of the Church as the body of Christ captures both the visible and invisible parts and helps us to understand the purpose of the Church and our lives.

Being Christ's Body

Think about your own body. What gives it life? How does it work? How do your hands, heart, eyes, ears, head and feet relate to each other and to the rest of your body? Many different parts contribute to the working of the whole.

Union with the body means life. Separation means death. When the word *body* is used to describe a group of people it conveys an image of unity. All the parts of the body—all of the people—though diverse, are united together.

What does it mean to be the body *of Christ*? Jesus Christ, the only son of God, came to live among us and free us from sin. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus made a new way of life possible for everyone. Because of Jesus we've been given the promise of eternal life in communion with God—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus rose from the dead and returned to the Father, but he didn't leave us alone. He sent the Holy Spirit. Every day he keeps his promise to be with us through the presence of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who draws us close to Jesus and to each other and inspires us to have faith.

The image of the Church as the body of Christ highlights the very close relationship between Jesus and those who follow him. Jesus tells us that he is the vine and we are the branches (see John 15:4-5).

Think of a grapevine with no branches. It won't produce fruit. What good is it without branches? Are you as important to the Church as the branches are to a grapevine? Yes! This is one of the reasons that the way you live your life matters so much.

Everyone in the Church, to carry the body metaphor a step further, is like a body part, while Jesus is the head. Think about your talents and try to imagine your part in the body. Are you more like a hand, foot, eye, ear, mouth, heart or something else? Every part makes a contribution to the whole.

The apostle Paul emphasized the role of the Spirit in the body's unity, saying, "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit," and he proclaimed to the people of Corinth, "Now you are Christ's body" (1 Corinthians 12:13, 27).

The Church has always struggled to achieve and maintain the unity that Jesus and Paul speak about. A well-known failure is the fracture of the Church that occurred in the 16th century during the Protestant Reformation.

Many people became separated from the Catholic Church due to conflicts regarding the need for change in the Church. New Protestant denominations emerged.

Though all Christians share the same roots, are blessed with the grace of God and are called to be united as one body, divisions remain today. This *Youth Update* focuses on the Catholic expression of faith in Christ, but keep in mind that we have much in common with other Christians.

When you gather with other Catholics for Eucharist you celebrate the presence of Jesus which makes the Church his body, and you are empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue Jesus' mission in the world. At the end of Mass when the celebrant says, "Go forth..." you are being sent out to make Christ's presence known.

The most important way you do this is by loving others. Jesus said to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another"(John 13:34).

Faith in Action

When you play on a team or play a musical instrument, you know that the more you practice, the better you become. The same can be said about your faith.

The more you practice, the stronger your faith becomes. Over time, your practices affect you. They make you who you are and help you to bring your life into harmony with God's will for you, especially when you do them in a spirit of love.

I invite you to explore four major arenas in which you can put your faith into action: when you pray and worship, when you proclaim God's Word, when you build up the community and when you work for justice.

Some of the practices of faith may not seem active because they are private and personal. The action is internal. These more reflective practices are important, though, because they strengthen your spiritual center so that you can go out and do what has to be done in God's world.

As you explore these four areas of practice, you may recognize that many are already part of your life. You may also be inspired to incorporate some new ones—as well as others not stated here—into your life.

1. Pray & Worship

Prayer and worship are at the heart of Catholic life. Young people all over the world raise their hearts and minds to God. They believe that they encounter God through the presence of the Spirit each and every day.

You can pray alone and with others, silently and in spoken and sung words, and with movement and artistic images. For Catholics, the most important prayer and worship take place in the celebration of sacraments, especially the Eucharist. These liturgies celebrate the mystery of Christ's passage through death to new life.

When you participate in liturgy you are invited to encounter Christ and to allow yourself to be drawn into the new life of Spirit that Christ makes possible. Try these starters:

- Thank God for all that you have every day.
- Pray the Our Father and other prayers you know by heart.
- Gather with others for Mass on Sundays.
- Pray with your family and friends.
- Meditate on the Scriptures.
- Make quiet time.
- Ask for forgiveness when you do something wrong.
- Set aside a weekend to attend a retreat offered by your parish or diocese.
- Get involved in a liturgical ministry.

2. Proclaim God's Word

Proclamation of the good news that Jesus announced is a fundamental part of the Church's mission. You continue Christ's mission when you speak the truth, love and forgive others and stand up for your beliefs.

Perhaps you know the story of Cassie Bernall. She was killed at Columbine High School by a classmate when she refused to deny her faith in Jesus.

While having to risk one's life to express faith is rare in the United States, standing up for your beliefs can be quite challenging. This is the case especially when going along with the crowd is what your friends expect.

This list of practices demonstrates the reality that your ability to *share* the gospel depends on your ability to *hear* the gospel yourself.

- Listen to God's word proclaimed in liturgy.
- Set aside time to read Scripture.

- Ask questions about life and your relationship to God and seek answers.
- Tell stories about your own faith life and take an interest in other people's stories.
- Tell the truth.
- Teach others, formally by helping with programs for kids, or informally through your everyday interactions.
- Strive to treat others the way Jesus would.
- Learn more about what the Catholic Church teaches (Check out www.lifeteen.com , a Web site created for Catholic teens).

3. Build Up the Community

Relationships are at the heart of leading a life of faith. Catholics face the challenge of building an intergenerational community that is a living expression of Christ's presence. You and your peers, no longer children, not yet adults, are in a unique position to reach across the generations to foster bonds among people.

The best role model for relationships is Jesus. He reached out to everyone—including the outcasts of his society: the poor, the sick, the sinners. He changed their lives.

When your relationships reflect Jesus' way of interacting with others and are characterized by such things as love, generosity, respect, compassion, tolerance and understanding, you are a sign of Christ's presence. Choose among these building blocks.

- Be generous.
- Show compassion toward those who suffer.
- Befriend a lonely classmate.
- Challenge peers whose behavior puts themselves or others at risk.
- Give the gift of time and a listening ear to a child, a peer, a parent or an elderly person.
- Organize a "prom" to which teens can escort their grandparents or elderly friends.
- Admit your mistakes and work to repair damage to your relationships.
- Share meals and time with your family and friends.
- Participate in parish life.

4. Work for Justice

Justice means giving every person that which he or she is due. The first step in figuring out the Catholic view of what people are due is to recognize that everyone is created in the image of God.

Because of this, all humans are equal in dignity or worth. It doesn't matter who they are, what they do, where they live or what they have. Such things as gender, race, socioeconomic status, age, popularity, athletic achievement, religious beliefs and ethnicity have no effect on a person's value.

Part of being Catholic is working to ensure that the dignity of every person is respected. This involves trying to shape a just society in which everyone can reach their God-given potential.

The practices that help to do this include those that provide a direct service that responds to a pressing need (for example, establishing a lunch program that helps poor students eat, organizing a clothing drive or collecting Christmas gifts for poor families) and those that attempt to eliminate an underlying injustice (for example, refusing to buy or wear clothes sold by companies that treat workers unfairly, advocating for affordable housing or speaking to legislators about opposing the death penalty). Here are others:

- Help the hungry by donating to a food pantry or serving meals at a shelter.
- Fix up or help build homes in impoverished neighborhoods.
- Plant a garden and share your harvest with the poor.
- Try to figure out the reasons for unjust situations and plan a response.
- Live simply by resisting materialism and consumerism.
- Resist racism.
- Show care for all of God's creation—including the earth and yourself.
- Respect the lives of all, including those who are unborn and those nearing death.
- Give your support to pregnant teens who choose life for their unborn children.

The Church Needs Young People

You are the Church of today when you lead a life of faith and continue the mission of Jesus. You have a huge fan in Pope Francis. After meeting with a group of 500 young people he said,

Why I like being with young people?" the Pope asked. "Because you have in your heart a promise of hope. You are bearers of hope. You, in fact, live in the present, but are looking at the future. You are the protagonists of the future, artisans of the future." Explaining what he meant, Pope Francis said young people have "three desires": Beauty, Goodness, and Truth.

"And these three desires that you have in your heart, you have to carry them forward, to the future," he said. "Make the future with beauty, with goodness and truth. Do you understand? This is the challenge: your challenge...you can do it: you have the power to do so. If you do not, it is because of laziness. ... I wanted to tell you: Have courage. Go forward. Make noise."

He said making noise means going "against this civilization that is doing so much harm. Got that? Go against the tide, and that means making noise. Go ahead. But with the values of beauty, goodness and truth."