

INTRODUCTION TO THE PASTORAL PLAN

“SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE LIGHT”*

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hilltop cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lampstand where it shines for all in the house. In the same way your light must shine, . . . so that, seeing your good works, they may give praise to your Father in heaven. (Mt 5:14-16)

WHY WE ARE ISSUING THIS PLAN

In every age, Jesus Christ is the light of all nations (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 1) with Christian men and women called to reflect the light of Christ and, in this way, to be “light” for the world. To reflect the light of Christ requires a maturity of faith and a willingness to live this faith daily in society. We join the Holy Father in affirming the essential dignity of young adult men and women—those in their late teens, twenties, and thirties—as “sons and daughters of the light.” Yet, many young adults tell us that they face increasingly complex and difficult times and that they need the help of the Catholic Christian community to be this “light.”

They tell us about changes in family life, church life, societal values, and neighborhoods. They highlight how these, along with advances in technology, communications, and medicine, present new and different problems and require new and different responses. We bishops recognize these changes and realize that we must address them together in the Church if we are to share the faith with the next generation.

We begin by acknowledging that at the center of our faith is the belief that all people, made in the image and likeness of God in Christ, are called to be sons and daughters of God—lights for the world. Through this plan, we hope to accomplish three things:

* This phrase, “Sons and Daughters of the Light,” is taken from John Paul II’s 1995 homily given at Sunday Mass in Manila.

1. To state firmly that we, as members of the Church, must actively invite and welcome young adults into the life of the Church. This does not mean placing special emphasis on one generation but having a vision of Church rooted in God's invitation to all generations.
2. To describe briefly the life situation of young adults so the Church can respond effectively to their needs and concerns.
3. To develop a comprehensive and workable plan of action for ministering with people in their late teens, twenties, and thirties based on the four goals of connecting young adults with Jesus Christ, the Church, the mission of the Church in the world, and a community of their peers.

Young adults hunger and thirst for God. We desire to experience Christ's love in our own lives that we may live lives of hope. As we develop our spiritual life, we look for three things. First, we search out meaningful experiences of liturgy....Second, we seek to learn more about our faith. Third, we are eager to share our personal stories in a small Christian community of friends. . . .

Sergio Rodrigues, Providence, R.I.

We recognize a certain urgency in developing this plan as a result of the listening sessions with young adults. These sessions provided us with valuable insights and knowledge concerning the Church's ministry with young adults. In particular, the following points deserve our attention:

- Many young adults are willing to share their leadership skills in ministry and their deep spirituality with their new parish communities.

For some, these gifts developed during their college years through participation in campus ministry.

- There is a growing interest among young adults, on campus and in the workplace, to devote time and energy to helping others through community service activities.
- Many young adults express a desire to develop a closer relationship with Jesus Christ and to deepen their spiritual life, but this does not necessarily mean being a member of a Church.

- During late adolescence and early twenties, many men and women, while claiming to be Catholic, decide to participate less in church activities, especially the Sunday Eucharist.¹
- With the birth of their first child, young adults typically return to active religious practice after a decline in church participation during late adolescence and their early twenties. Today this return is no longer certain. If they do return, it can be with great tentativeness.
- There is a growing movement away from an institutional conception of religion to an individual conception of faith. This is particularly true for those born in the 1970s and 1980s.²
- Many Catholic young adults seeking a welcoming community and answers to questions about the meaning of life are attracted to religious/spiritual movements, sects and cults, and fundamentalist churches.
- Many Catholic men and women tell of not feeling welcomed in our communities, while others speak of wanting, but not finding, the Church's help with serious moral and economic questions.
- People from different ethnic groups sometimes struggle to express their faith in terms of their culture.³
- The membership of many, if not most, of our Catholic organizations is much older today than it was twenty years ago.
- Interchurch marriages have increased. This ultimately affects church life, especially as a couple decides how to worship and then raise their children in a religious tradition.⁴
- The values of many young adults no longer come primarily from family and Church but from friends, the media, and contemporary society.

1 James D. Davidson, *The Catholic Pluralism Project* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University, 1995). In this study of those born after 1961 (post-Vatican II cohort), 33 percent attend Mass regularly compared with 40 percent for Vatican II cohort and 64 percent for pre-Vatican II cohort. Of the post-Vatican II group, 73 percent also believe that one can be a good Catholic without going to Mass.

2 Andrea S. Williams and James D. Davidson, "Catholic Conceptions of Faith: A Generational Analysis," in *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* (December 6, 1995). Research based on the above-named study.

3 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1987), no. 12.

4 Center for Marriage and Family, *Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church: Getting It Right* (Omaha, NE: Creighton University, 1995), 35-36.

- Many young adults feel they do not have the same access to economic and social opportunities as their parents. This affects their faith, hopes, and dreams for the future.
- Young adults who suffer from violence and poverty come from other countries to the United States looking for peace and for ways to make a living. They hope that their quality of life will improve in this new land.

In light of these insights, our ministry with young adults, who make up approximately 30 percent of the total U.S. population, must be intensified.⁵ We need to be a Church that is interested in the lives of these men and women and is willing to invite them into our community. We need to be a Church imbued with a missionary zeal for the Gospel. When young adults accept our invitation, we must welcome them, acknowledge their participation, and make room for them in all aspects of church life. This outreach is especially important to the alienated. The words of Pope Paul VI speak of the importance of this ministry: “Existing circumstances suggest to us that we should devote our attention in particular to young people. . . . It is essential that young people themselves . . . should be ever more zealous in their apostolate to their contemporaries. The Church relies greatly on such help from young people, and we ourselves have repeatedly expressed our full confidence in them.”⁶

THE AUDIENCE FOR THE PASTORAL PLAN

This plan is written to people in leadership positions in church life to encourage them to recognize, support, and motivate ministry with, by, and for young adults. This includes those in parishes, campus ministry centers, dioceses, the military, and Catholic movements and organizations. It is especially written

5 William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future: 1584-2069* (New York: Morrow Publishers, 1991). They define a generation as a cohort whose length approximates the span of a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality. As such, in 1995, Generation X, born between 1961 and 1981, accounted for 30 percent of the total U.S. population. This is approximately 79.4 million people. Since 1980, there have been more Xers than baby boomers.

6 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), no. 72.