

# YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT CATECHESIS

## Communicating our Love for Adolescents

*Bob Rice asks: are we communicating our love for youth and young adults in ways they understand?*

**T**here was a teen in my youth group, let's call him David, who told me that his parents didn't love him. 'They stick me in all sorts of activities so they'll never have to see me, when I am home they both work, and when I get frustrated with them they give me a gift—as if they can buy me off!' But his parents had a different perspective: 'We drive him all over the place so he can have fun at school, we work two jobs to make sure he has all he needs, and we even buy expensive gifts to let him know that we love him!'

I felt like the jailer from the classic movie *Cool Hand Luke* when I told them, 'What we have here is a failure to communicate.'

St. John Bosco, the patron saint for youth ministry, said that it is important 'not only that the boys be loved, but *that they know that they are loved.*'<sup>1</sup> I am convinced that we who work with youth truly love them (we're not in this for the money). But *do they know that? Are we communicating our love for them in a way they understand?*

Love must be communicated not only between a parent and child, but also between the catechist and the one receiving the faith. 'If the child's emotional need for love has not been met, then the theological idea of a loving God will have little meaning for the teenager.'<sup>2</sup>

That last quote was from an excellent book by Gary Chapman titled *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers*. As the title suggests, Chapman suggests five ways we can express our love for teens. It's important that we master all these ways, he says, because different teens experience and express love in different ways. David's parent's expressed their love for him by giving gifts; but David didn't care about gifts; he wanted quality time with them.

All of us primarily speak one love language or another, and we naturally express our love in the way we like to receive it. But youth ministry is missionary work, and we need to learn other 'languages' to reach as many people as we can.

### Words of Affirmation

For some, the best way to express love for them is to speak words of affirmation to them. The more specific you can be, the better. 'I admire how passionate you are about what you believe.' 'I can see that you have a generous heart.' 'You are a natural leader!' We need to go out of our way to affirm the great things we see in them.

We also have to be careful to avoid sarcastic or negative comments, because those who respond well to affirmation are very sensitive to negative words. I worked hard to make our youth group a 'sarcasm free zone', especially when people shared in small groups. And anytime someone was bold enough to share something, I would always find something positive to say about it.

Don't forget that the Bible has an incredible number of affirming words to those who follow Christ. Share these often.

*If we learn these languages teens become more engaged, and the love of God becomes more a reality than a topic*

### Physical Touch

Some respond to words, others respond to touch. I know it seems taboo to talk about ways to *include* physical contact in catechetical settings, but we have to be aware that many teens express and receive love in this way.

We can be smart about it. Handshakes, hi-fives, and pats on the back are all appropriate ways to speak this language. Some kids like to hug—and that can be tricky. I know many that have the 'hug with one arm and only if they initiate it' rule which seems to work for them.

Another great way to incorporate appropriate physical contact is if you can participate in a game or sport with them. St. John Bosco used to ask his priests to play soccer with the kids, and not allow them to coach or referee. And what is more Catholic than to lay our hands on a teen's shoulders and say a prayer for them? That moment of contact can make a huge difference for them.

### Quality Time

Chapman writes, 'Quality time means to give the teenager your undivided attention. At the moment, nothing else matters.'<sup>3</sup> The difficulty in speaking this language is that it involves *time*, which many catechists don't seem to have—particularly if your situation involves a large amount of teens.

But there are a lot of ways to make it work. I know one religion teacher who said at the beginning of the semester that she wanted a 15 minute meeting with every student in the class. She scheduled it over a month or so, and gave them her undivided attention as she heard them share about their family life, thoughts on God, and their dreams and aspirations. 'The first time I did it I wondered how I was going to find the time,' she told me, 'but the change in the classroom was so dramatically different that I began to wonder how I ever did without it!'

Don't confuse 'quality time' with 'private time'. I have had a lot of quality moments with teenagers in a room full of other people. The point is that you





### □ A Failure to Communicate

stop what you are doing, look them in the eyes, and listen to them as if they are the most important thing in the world at that moment. It might only be 5 minutes, but it will tell them that they are important and they are loved.

## Acts of Service

‘For the Son of man himself came not to be served, but to serve...’ (Mk 10:45). How do we serve the teens we catechize? We might say that we serve them by sharing the faith, but if they’re in a situation where they feel they *have* to be there it won’t communicate love.

Communicating this love language takes into account all the needs of the teenager’s life, not just their religious formation. There are a lot of ways to do it. One youth group offered free tutoring for difficult classes, and provided a quiet place for group study when exams were taking place. I knew a volunteer youth leader at a parish who was a beautician, and before every prom she would offer to help girls with their hair and makeup (she became very popular!) Our parish let teens use the gym so they could get ready for basketball tryouts. As a teacher, I can serve them by adjusting due dates for large assignments when they tell me they have a play or something else of significance in their life.

Praying for them is a great way to serve, but we have to be specific about it. If their aunt is sick, I ask what her name is and I write it down. A week or so later, I’ll ask how she is doing (by name) and let them know that I am still praying. I’m not bragging about my prayer life; I’m communicating that I love them and I take their needs very seriously.

## Gifts

In this materialistic age, many teenagers respond to getting gifts. They don’t need to be expensive, just thoughtful. One day we did a session on baptism and I gave everybody a bottle of holy water—it probably cost me 30 cents each. A few years later I met a student who told me that he still used it! Holy cards, religious medals, and rosaries are great giveaways, too. Yes, some kids won’t care—but to others it means the world.

One time I saw a bag of 30 plastic astronauts on sale for less than a dollar. I bought it and brought it into class, saying that anyone who had a good answer would receive a ‘special spaceman of excellence and truth’. I was amazed at how many of them starting answering the questions! Cards on birthdays, pizza after a meeting, t-shirts for retreats, and presents when they graduate are great ways to communicate your love for them through gifts. You don’t need to spend a lot of money; you just need to show that you care.

*St. John Bosco said, ‘If you love them, they will follow you anywhere.’  
But it only works when they know that they are loved.*

## What love language are you?

These love languages aren’t just for teenagers, they apply to everyone. What love languages do you primarily respond to? It is important to know this because that is the love language you will usually ‘speak’ to others. I’m big on words of affirmation, so I naturally speak positive things to others when I want to communicate my affection. But I couldn’t care less about ‘quality time’—to me it almost feels like ‘wasted time’. I had to get over that quickly when I realized there were teens who thought ‘I hated them’ because I didn’t give them my

undivided attention. My reaction: *Didn’t I tell them I thought they were cool?* I spoke *my* language to them, not theirs.

Remember that all of these ‘love languages’ can become ‘hate languages’ if we unwittingly do the opposite. ‘Words of affirmation’ teens are sensitive to critique. ‘Physical touch’ kids are offended when we push them away. ‘Quality time’ teenagers feel hated if they think you don’t have the time for them. The truth is that we can’t always speak these languages in the ways teenagers feel they need. We can’t fill the ‘love gap’ in their lives. We can’t replace their mom or dad. But we can find little ways to let them know that they are loved, and by doing so we can more effectively share the love of Christ which is unconditional and never fails.

Catechetical programs and ministries that find a way to speak all these languages find dramatically positive results. Teens become more engaged, a sense of community is built, and the love of God becomes more a reality than a topic. One of St. John Bosco’s most famous quotes is, ‘If you love them, they will follow you anywhere.’ But it only works when they know that they are loved.

## Notes

1. As quoted by John Paul II in his letter, *Iuvenum Patris*
2. Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers*, p.40
3. *Ibid*, p.75

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