

## Where Have All the Young People Gone?

*(A talk by Peter McVerry, SJ, April 27, 2023)  
(Sponsored by the Association of Catholics in Ireland (ACI))*

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When Jesus was around, thousands of people flocked to hear him. They sometimes spent the whole day listening to him. They forgot they were hungry. They couldn't get enough of him. Clearly, what Jesus was saying was not irrelevant to them. Has the message changed? In some ways, I think it has. I believe the Church has been preaching a God of the law which young people, rightly, reject. Jesus was preaching a God of compassion to which I believe young people more readily respond.

Maybe young people today are the prophets in the Church, trying to tell us something about the Church which many in the Church don't want to hear. So, sometimes we blame them for leaving the Church rather than blaming the Church for pushing them out. We keep hoping they will return to the Church, but young people will not come back to the Church as we have known it. They keep reminding us, screaming at us, that the Church as it is, is irrelevant to them.

Their experience and understanding of the Church is through their parish. So, what do they see and what do they experience there? Now, we know that many priests are very involved with the community, visiting the sick, the lonely, consoling the bereaved, and so on, but what young people see are priests baptizing infants even though they know when these infants grow up the vast majority of them won't have the slightest interest in being part of the Christian community. They see priests hearing confessions of seven-year-olds, who, like themselves, when they were seven, repeat what their teachers have taught them to say. They see priests having Confirmation days which are a 25% religious event, a 25% social event for the adults, and a 50% very successful fund-raising event for the children. To them, it is totally irrelevant. They have not rejected Christianity; they have never experienced it. What they have experienced and rejected is "Churchiality". Religion is one big yawn for them as long as Church involvement concerns itself with Church involvement. Jesus said that he "came that we may have life and have it to the full" but young people don't find the Church to be life-giving. On the contrary, they find it deadening.

And they listen to the Church laying down moral laws, particularly laws relating to sexual behaviour, and they reject the very basis for these morals. I think the foundation for the Church's moral code derives from natural law. The Church says, when God made the universe, God laid down the physical and natural laws which govern the universe, laws which are unchanging and unchangeable. So, when God created human beings, God laid down the moral laws which are similarly unchanging and unchangeable. So, since sexual intercourse is designed for procreation, every act must be open to that possibility. Hence, condoms are immoral, as are homosexual acts and sex outside of a life-long relationship which we call marriage.

But young people are not interested in natural law. Their approach to life is, we're here, we didn't ask to be here, so let's make the best of it. And anything which does not cause harm to

others, or which brings benefit to others, such as preventing sexually transmitted disease, or unwanted pregnancies, through using condoms, or expressing love and affection between two people of the same sex, is, to them, morally permissible. Perhaps they show a deeper appreciation of the dignity of every human being that does a church which emphasizes laws.

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