

# WHERE ARE THE YOUTH?

## Hopeful Signs for the Next Generation

by Tim Drake

You're sitting in the pew, and as you prepare yourself for the celebration of the Mass, you glance around. The pews are filled with those whose hair is graying at the temples, and you ask yourself, "Where are all the kids?"

You're not alone.

Day in, day out, our family makes an honest effort to attend daily Mass. It's something we've done for several years. At Mass, however, I note that our family of seven is the only one below the age of 40. I ask myself, "Where are all the kids?"

While it's tempting to believe that the young aren't engaged or active in the Church, it's inaccurate. You just need to know where to look for them.

After two years of research and talking with more than 300 youth and young adults, I'm encouraged that there are genuine reasons for hope. While the young may not be sitting next to us in the pews at daily Mass, they are often active in the Church in a variety of other sometimes unseen ways. Here's where they are:

### Teen Missionaries

While the pews may be graying, teens are frequently active with the Church outside of Mass. They're gathering for Saturday and Sunday evening LifeTeen Masses



photo by Beth Hart

World Youth Day 2002, Toronto, Canada

in Phoenix and Atlanta, assembling for worship by the thousands for Net Evangelization Team's LifeLine Masses in St. Paul, Minnesota, and celebrating Mass with bishops such as Archbishop Charles Chaput at Denver's Cathedral. They're also serving as missionaries both at home and abroad. Young Disciples Teams give up their summer vacations to travel throughout North Dakota evangelizing their peers and adults. Young adults are working with and catechizing the poor in Latin America through organizations such as Youth for the Third Millennium.

They include such inspirational young adults as Sarah Bollinger. In

the wake of a tragic mudslide in Nicaragua, Bollinger and her youth group from Prince of Peace Catholic Church in Buford, Georgia hosted a bake sale to help those impacted by the disaster.

Eight years later, Bollinger has made nine mission trips to the country. Her organization, Amigos for Christ, has raised more than \$13 million in aid. They have built a cafeteria, drilled two-dozen wells, completed 170 homes, and built a surgical hospital.

### Successful Seminaries

Vibrant young priests are on fire for their faith, love the Church, and are embracing the priesthood, in spite of the sexual abuse scandals

that have plagued the Church over the past four years. Cut from the same cloth as Pope John Paul II, many young men say that they owe their vocation to his example.

In 2004, more than 550 young seminarians signed a letter supporting the practice of priestly celibacy. The number of diocesan seminarians has increased 14 percent since the late 1990s. Priestly vocations are coming from some of the most unlikely places. Those dioceses with the most ordinations per capita include Charlotte, North Carolina; Bismarck and Fargo, North Dakota; Mobile, Alabama; Tyler, Texas; and Tulsa, Oklahoma. In Bismarck, there are currently half as many seminarians as the total number of active priests in the diocese. In the Archdiocese of St. Paul/Minneapolis, the ordination class of 2005 will be the seminary's largest in 35 years.

"It's a spike in the middle of an upward trend," said Father Tom Wilson, vocation director for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. "Our number of college seminarians has doubled in the last three years."

### Theology of the Body Discussion Groups

Papal biographer George Weigel has described the Pope's "theology of the body" as the time bomb set to go off in the new millennium. The Pope's teaching is the antidote to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Young adult groups from Denver to Manhattan have ignited the fuse through dynamic discussion groups that gather to understand the Pope's thought. In addition, dynamic young leaders are unpacking the Holy Father's teachings and making them accessible to young adult audiences. A Theology of the Body International Alliance has formed to bring these groups together for ongoing collaboration and annual conferences.

### Burgeoning Convents and Monasteries

Young men and women are filling some monasteries and convents to overflowing in places such as New York City (Franciscan Friars of the

Renewal and the Sisters of Life), Ann Arbor, Michigan (Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist), Toronto, Ohio (Franciscan Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother), and Nashville, Tennessee (Nashville Dominicans). Orders that embrace the Holy Father and the teachings of the Church, and that are Eucharistic and Marian centered, are attracting authentic vocations to lead the future of the Church.

### The Internet

Television was the medium of choice for the previous generation, but the young are wired 24-7 through their cell phones, palm pilots, and laptops. The X & Y generations are learning the true meaning of the word *Catholic* by connecting and evangelizing their peers around the globe using the Internet. Some are even meeting over the Internet through Catholic dating services such as CatholicMatch.com and Ave Maria Single Catholics, getting married, and raising new Catholic families.

That's how graphic designer Maria Kaczperski met her husband. Her previous relationships had ended badly and she didn't hold out much hope for finding a date—especially over the Internet. When she first signed onto Ave Maria Singles in February 1999, her expectations were pretty low. So convinced that she would remain single the rest of her life, she had begun making plans to work as a missionary in Honduras.

That's when she met Mark, a horticulture professor from Macon, Ga., online. While not an active Catholic, Mark agreed to pray for Maria during her mission trip, returned to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and committed to attend daily Mass for her.

After months of courtship online, the couple met one another in person, and began praying the Rosary together on the telephone. The fall after they met, Mark first told Maria he loved her. Maria was frightened at first, but then Mark wrote her a letter explaining what love meant to him.

"He described a type of sacrificial love," said Maria. "I had never been loved that way before." A month later, Maria told Mark she loved

him in return. They were married on Oct. 7, 2000—the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary.

### World Youth Day

For nineteen years, more than 11 million youth from all over the globe have accepted the invitation to spend a week with the Holy Father at World Youth Day—the epicenter of the Catholic youth movement. In August, hundreds of thousands will gather in Cologne, Germany. They gather not only to pray together, but also to show their love for the Pope and their devotion to Jesus Christ. The fruits of World Youth Day are just beginning to show as young men and women talk of the event's impact upon their own decisions to serve the Church in various ways.

This became most poignant to me while working on a story on the impact of World Youth Day in Denver. I was interviewing a young nun at Ann Arbor's Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist. One nun told me of how World Youth Day in Denver played a pivotal role in her decision to become a nun. When she was finished, she handed the phone to another young woman. She handed it to yet another. Here, in this one order, four young women had made the decision to enter a convent, in part, because of their experiences at World Youth Day. That is being repeated in seminaries, monasteries, and convents around the world.

Yes, the future is bright. The Church's New Springtime is at hand. Its seeds have been sown, taken root, and are beginning to sprout. The Holy Spirit continues to work much as He did when He fell upon a young Jewish girl in Nazareth more than two thousand years ago. ■

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