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Carla Nunneri

Loyola Marymount University, pc5965@yhaoo.com

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Walk Beside Me: A Look at Theology of Accompaniment with Youth on Retreats

by

Carla Nunneri

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In our fast-paced modern world we all need time to relax and renew. Work, school, family obligations, and social commitments leave little room for a relationship with God. Christians have long used retreats as a break from the everyday momentum to meet those responsibilities. To retreat means to step back. On a retreat the retreatant is encouraged to step back from their everyday life to reflect and recharge. It is an opportunity to assess what is going on in our lives, what barriers to our serenity should be released and what positive actions can be integrated into our lives for a more wholistic and spiritual experience. It can be argued that a person who regularly goes on retreat is more productive and fulfilled in their jobs, home life, schools, and social circles. Retreats work when all those involved understand that the Spirit is in charge. Egos and personal biases can get in the way of a successful retreat leaving the retreatant unfulfilled with the experience. It is crucial that those facilitating the retreat understand that they play an important role in accompanying the retreatant. When accompanying becomes leading, or pushing the retreatant along, then the spiritual element of the retreat is potentially lost.

Case Component

I have been involved in retreats in a variety of capacities for the past sixteen years. I have served as a chaperone, facilitator, and director. I am a certified Catholic Youth Minister through the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. I have learned much and seen much in my years involved in ministry. Guiding youth as they trudge their faith journey is a privilege and I have learned that the theology of accompaniment is essential for a successful journey. Many times, however, those in leadership roles such as youth leaders, facilitators, chaplains and even

chaperones, sometimes have their own agendas and this can complicate the spiritual journey for a retreatant.

In the past years of working on youth retreats with many different youth leaders, chaplains, and directors I have witnessed a disconnect within the ideology of accompanying youth on THEIR journey and forcing a retreatant towards a relationship with God. Many of those who are planning and implementing youth retreats have a preconceived idea as to what should happen and how youth should experience the retreat which inevitably causes frustration for all people involved. Our primary purpose as leaders is to accompany youth as they develop their relationship with God without pressure or expectations. If a leader aggressively leads a retreatant through the retreat process, the Spirit of the retreat can be stifled, unproductive, or lost altogether.

I have noticed this issue sporadically when I was a chaperone and facilitator, but it really made an impression on me when our chaplain and administration at the high school where I was employed as both Theology teacher and Retreat Director, began making suggestions as to the way in which I directed the retreats and how I taught in the classroom. They said they felt I was not adhering to the bishops' curriculum, at times not canonically correct and not making church doctrine the focal point of retreats. I expressed to them that every retreat and class is different, and it is important for the director to be sensitive to the needs of the retreatants involved and to journey with them and not to push them in any one direction. The ideology of accompaniment suggests walking along side those on a spiritual journey just like Jesus did. Let the retreatants have their own spiritual experience if any and let the Holy Spirit work through everyone without getting in the way. I have often seen leaders push retreatants into having the experience they think should happen. It never

works. The retreatant feels manipulated and becomes closed off from any potential experience with God. I have seen this firsthand and it was not a comfortable experience for anyone.

At the time I noticed this, I was the retreat director for all freshmen, sophomore, and junior retreats. I was organizing seventeen retreats per year. It was my ninth year at this high school and our retreat system had become extremely popular. Prior to my taking this position, it was nearly impossible to fill all the spots on a retreat and often retreats were cancelled because there wasn't enough interest. I was offered the position because I had been successful in implementing and maintaining a successful retreat program at a nearby parish and the hope was that I could help this retreat system become more successful as well. I made many changes such as the location of the retreat, format changes, training leaders (who were not trained before) and allowing retreatants to have their own experience. Soon we were filling up all seventeen retreats by September of every year.

An extremely uncomfortable experience happened on a Kairos retreat where I was serving as chaperone. Even though I was not the director of Kairos, I worked very closely with the Kairos director and chaperoned often. This was the September Kairos, and we were now working with a new chaplain who had been assigned to our high school. This chaplain had already been with us for one school year and had not been very pastoral. He was critical of our way of teaching and the way we ran our retreat program. He felt that retreats took too much time away from our academic setting. He disclosed to me that he was not comfortable around teenagers. He was very distant and dogmatic when talking to kids and in confession, many times, left a student in tears because he told them they were disordered. The student

would then come to us and we would have to pastorally help them through such a painful experience.

In his second year at our high school, he took a more active part in all areas of theology on campus; he became our department chair moving out our previous department chair of eighteen years. He was more vocal about what he did not like about our liturgies and he had a lot of suggestions for the retreats to make them more theologically productive and canonically correct. When asked to explain his feelings he would often brush us off and move away from the discussion. He was not interested in any collaboration. He simply wanted things changed because he was the priest and therefore should be obeyed. This was not an assumption on our part, this is what he told us. I became concerned about his tactics but continued doing my job and keeping the retreatants at the forefront of my decisions. As director, I did not need his approval. I tried my best to circumvent any issues with him and still do my job.

I agreed to chaperone this September Kairos and knew it would be well run because we had seasoned young adult leaders. The other chaperones had been on many Kairos retreats and the retreatants were a solid group of seniors ready to embrace this retreat. On the fourth and final day of the retreat we celebrated Mass with much involvement from the retreatants. After all the talks, activities and personal growth that had gone on in the previous three days, the retreatants felt a closeness to scripture and liturgy, and it was evident. In this preparation time, each small group chose a scripture reading to be used during liturgy. It gave the retreatants ownership of this liturgy and it also allowed them to use scripture to show the transformation they had experienced. It was always wonderful to see how this would develop and it would always make for a meaningful liturgy.

At this time on Kairos when the instructions were given, the chaplain stood up and said audibly that this would not be allowed. We would need to use the readings of the day because that is what is canonically acceptable. He was very stern and inflexible about this. The Kairos director explained that this is what always has happened, and all other chaplains involved had never questioned this activity and it is an especially important part of Kairos for the retreatants. The director also suggested that perhaps for this time it would go on as planned and then she and the chaplain could discuss this later privately. His response was "We WILL use only the readings of the day...I am the chaplain and I expect you to follow my directive. There is no need for further discussion!" We were dumbfounded and the young adult leaders were very disturbed and confused by this behavior from the chaplain. We called for a short break.

The director came to me visibly upset and we discussed what just happened. As retreat director, I went to the chaplain to further explain that he was changing the format of the retreat without thinking about the needs of the retreatants. I tried to explain that their being able to choose the readings was a deeper level of connection not only to scripture but to liturgy and that they had always taken this activity solemnly and with great care in choosing the readings. I also tried to explain that his position on this retreat was, in fact, chaplain not director. He did not appreciate that. He said to me that it was his job to make sure that anything theological was canonically correct and that he would be making other changes as well as time went on. He said that the focus of the retreatants was to understand on a deeper level their responsibility as good Catholics who follow dogma and do not question authority. He walked away and I was speechless. We spoke to the young adult leaders and told them that we completely understood their position but that the chaplain

was tying our hands and without administration to back us up we did not want to create a combative atmosphere on this last day of retreat. The leaders stepped up and explained as best they could to the retreatants, but liturgy was less than joyful. In the end, administration did not support us, and we lost this very pastoral part of the Kairos retreat.

I could not stop thinking about how one person's perspective could derail an entire activity that had been used successfully for so many years without giving the least bit of concern to the retreatants involved. I started to see this type of self-involved behavior on many retreats, in the classroom, and even in larger activities like Youth Day. I saw how the need for leadership to push things in a direction to suit their needs could potentially stifle youth to truly experience the Holy Spirit in its full glory. Directors, chaplains, and adult leaders should understand that when they are facilitating a retreat it is not for them but for the retreatants. We are merely the conduit between them and God.

Context Component

A pastoral approach is necessary for a retreat to be successful especially with young people. I believe there is not proper formation of pastoral leadership. I believe that slowly this has become a problem because those in leadership formation have not understood what it means to be pastoral. To be pastoral means to have the characteristics of peace, serenity, and simplicity. A pastoral approach is to meet the person where they are and to journey with them. It means to experience spirituality in an egalitarian manner. Retreats are experiential; therefore, the outcome can never be identical to another retreat. I would argue that lack of proper training relates directly to the decreasing number of young people remaining faithful in our churches and wanting to attend retreats.

Priests who are too legalistic, leaders and directors who are ill-trained and a Catholic school system that puts all emphasis (and money) on academics and sports have all contributed to the failing retreat system in most Catholic schools. We are no longer using Jesus as the example of how to minister to people. He did not force but rather accompanied people in all their flaws and brought them to a personal relationship with God on their terms. That is risky, I know, but it is the only way for faith to be authentic and grounded in the Holy Spirit.

Retreats are designed to allow the retreatant an opportunity to grow in his or her faith. It is a very personal journey. As a Retreat Director I have seen the miraculous internal changes that can happen on a retreat and it is why I spent so many years in training to become a Youth Minister. As we see youth leaving the church more and more it becomes evident that we are not meeting their needs. This generation of youth are much more individualistic, inquisitive, and seeking spiritual experiences that are in line with their unique desires. They do not want to belong to the church of their parents. They want a church that is inclusive, compassionate, and understanding of all the issues that this generation is facing. LGBTQ+ issues, racial injustice, and gender discrimination are just a few of the serious issues that surround this generation known as Generation Z.

Generation Z refers to the generation born between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s. According to Kim Parker and Ruth Igielnik, "We know it's (Generation Z) different from previous generations in some important ways, but similar in many ways to the Millennial generation that came before it. Members of Gen Z are more racially and ethnically diverse than any previous generation, and they are on track to be the most well-educated generation yet. They are also digital natives who have little or no memory of the world as it

existed before smartphones.”¹ As stated, Generation Z holds many of the same qualities as the Millennial Generation, but with one more very important attribute. Generation Z has used the internet since a young age, and they are generally comfortable with technology and with interacting on social media. For Generation Z, their lives have a much larger scope and global exposure because of technology and social media. To avoid confusion I will be referring to Generation Z, as youth.

Youth are looking for a God that is approachable, forgiving and understanding. This generation of youth is not entangled in rules and regulations. By nature, they fight against rules and push the boundaries as much as they can. As a past high school teacher in a Catholic school I saw this every day. From tardiness, to uniform violations to boys sporting facial hair when it is against the rules, they push the boundaries every day and are overtly encouraged to do so on social media. This means that not only are we to know what youth are listening to and watching, we must also be aware of who the political and social role models are for this generation. Those role models change day to day; what is important and relevant today will be irrelevant tomorrow. Activities and experiences for youth today must be fresh, grab their attention quickly and touch on the heartbeat of what is important to them today. Their lives are on a frenetic hamster wheel and we, as mentors, need to keep up with who is important to them at any given moment. If we fail to do this, we instantly lose credibility. In all aspects of their lives, youth want to be understood and validated. We must keep up with them so that we can have a chance to accompany them. This is not always easy.

¹ Kim Parker and Ruth Igielnik, “On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far,” *Pew Research Center* (May 14, 2020): <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far/>

Youth are attached to social media all day, every day. They are never without their smart devices and everything they need is at their fingertips. This becomes quite clear when, before a retreat begins, they must turn over their phones to the director. The look of abject horror is hard to miss. How will they survive with no phone? As a director the retreat format had better fill in that gap quickly or you are left with a group of very resentful youth who will not listen to a word you say. The retreat format needs to be attractive and engaging from the very beginning.

This is not comfortable for Generation Z. They feel that their smartphones are an extension of who they are individually. They have an insatiable need to be unique...to be understood...to be heard. They want to ask questions, bring forth new ideas and be given the chance to shine in their own distinctive way. This, unfortunately, is often not appreciated within retreats. Some directors, leaders and clergy are uncomfortable with meeting youth where they are. The need to follow a format and accomplish what needs to be done becomes more important than the natural fluidity that a retreat can have depending on the youth in attendance. We should be able to merge doctrine and pastoral care. Doctrine and pastoral care are not opposites. They are two sides of the same coin. Both are equally important, and both should be addressed in retreats. It is a fine line to walk between these two ideologies but when it is done in a way that links them together, authentic spiritual change can occur. Why is this not happening in our parishes and schools?

The article "Reaching the Rootless", explains this slow movement of church, "[Catholics are] pretty slow in responding to changing demographics...We're burdened with years of institutional history. We invest energy in places, churches, and offices. [Young]

people often don't fit into that structure."² Youth have a fresh approach to faith and as the older generation we should be walking this journey with them. If you are lucky enough to have a forward-thinking pastor or chaplain, then youth will have retreat experiences that are fruitful and spiritual in a variety of ways. But sadly, that is often not the case. There is a contradiction between the retreat format and all its unsaid expectations and how we minister to youth.

I received my training from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. It was a two-year process and the final project had to be approved and accepted by the entire youth ministry education team. It was an intense program. We only had one lesson on retreats and that was mostly about the legal issues and the reporting process if someone were to disclose something alarming. There was no mention of how to accompany teenagers on their journey towards God within a retreat. Deacons go through a five-year program with no classes on facilitating retreats and the seminary which is a five to seven-year program has no training on how to be a spiritual presence on retreats. I believe this is where the problem begins. If we are not giving the proper amount of time and training to those who want to facilitate, direct, or spiritually guide retreatants then we will run into conflicting ideologies of how to accompany youth on retreats.

Theological Component

Youth are looking for a God and a faith that is approachable, forgiving and understanding. This generation of youth is not entangled in rules and regulations. They are comfortable fighting against the status quo. They want a faith that is their own. They want a

² Nicholas Liao, "Reaching the Rootless," *U.S. Catholic* 07 (October 2018): 13.

religion that appeals to them as youth. Roberto S. Goizueta refers to this concept as popular religiosity. In Goizueta's research, which focused on Latinx people, popular religiosity has allowed them to maintain their identity. I would argue that the concept of popular religiosity could be applied to youth as well:

In general terms, popular religiosity can be defined as the set of experiences, beliefs, and rituals which more-or-less peripheral human groups create, assume, and develop ...and which to a greater or lesser degree distance themselves from what is recognized as normative by church and society, striving (through rituals, experiences, and beliefs) to find an access to God and Salvation which they feel they cannot find in what the church and society present as normative.³

Youth feel that they are not seen individually and that means they are no longer important. They want to ask questions, bring forth new ideas and be given the chance to shine in their own distinctive way. This, unfortunately, is often not appreciated within retreats. Some directors, leaders and clergy are uncomfortable with meeting youth where they are in their faith journey and life experiences. The need to follow a format, adhere to church teachings and dogma becomes more important than the flexibility that a retreat can have depending on the youth in attendance. If we strictly adhere to the high school curriculum of acceptable moral topics, then none of the issues that are enormously important to youth will even be mentioned.

As a high school Retreat Director it was my job to create a retreat experience that allowed youth to discover who they are within their faith and within society. They do not want a one size fits all type of experience and they want to push the boundaries in their faith so that it can become more valid and purposeful to them. We should be able to merge

³ Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 29.

doctrine and pastoral care, but many in leadership roles do not want to tackle the often-uncomfortable topics that youth bring to retreats to work through. This is exactly, however, what retreats are for. In an organic setting, away from their everyday distractions, youth have an opportunity, for a few days, to really delve deeper into the questions and obstacles that they may have about faith, relationships, and social issues that they face every day. This is a change of focus for those who direct and guide retreats and even though many in leadership roles are willing to travel this new journey, some simply are not. As history has shown us, change is not always welcome. In general, as a church, we do not like change and when change does happen it is often at a snail's pace.

We need to accompany youth through their faith journey as a companion not as a director. "In our world," Pope Francis teaches us, "the church will have to initiate everyone—priests, religious, and laity—into this 'art of accompaniment' which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other." (The Joy of the Gospel, 169).⁴ With Jesus as our ultimate role model, it would naturally follow that a theology of accompaniment is the course of action to take with youth. To find out where they are in their faith journey and then to accompany them for part or most of the way in unity. This was Jesus' example. He did not force, guilt, or demand a certain way of believing. He only required that you follow him and serve others.

To accompany someone means to walk alongside them. To share with them but allow them to follow their own personal path without judgment or interruption. This begins with the relationship between a youth and the Gospel. Looking at the role model we have in Jesus is the first time a youth is accompanied albeit through scripture. The Gospel stories show

⁴ Bill Huebsch, *The Art of Accompaniment* (New London: Twenty-third Publications, 2017), 5.

how Jesus lived in action rather than words. In my experience as a high school teacher, youth love to hear the stories of the Gospel but not the way they heard it in elementary school. They want to see how Jesus struggled, was confused, angry, loving, and compassionate and to juxtapose those feelings in first century Palestine where things were much different. In first century Palestine women and children were an invisible part of society and those in charge were men and usually men who had some sort of political or spiritual power. Many others were marginalized and forgotten in first century Palestine. Youth want to engage in the text, and they want to know what it means to them today in this fast paced, technological world they live in.

In *The Revelatory Text*, Sandra Schneiders discusses the text of meeting as a metaphor for going back to the tabernacle as a place of gathering. She posits that when experiencing the text the following three perspectives must collide: the world behind the text (historical research, history of text's interpretation and biblical commentaries), the world of the text (narrative criticism, genre and form, tone, allusions, and framing devices), and the world before the text (personal awareness, what the world is like, and questions and responses). Using these three perspectives allows the text to become more robust and potentially more meaningful because it becomes personal. If one uses this same formula when leading or attending a retreat, the experience again will be more robust and meaningful. Doctrine and evangelization can work together to allow a youth to fully grasp the grace that God is offering. If those in leadership accompany a retreatant with compassion and open mindedness, the grace can potentially be felt tenfold. "Spiritual accompaniment operates in the realm of grace. Grace gives accompaniment its force. We might say, then, that accompaniment is help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's

personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating with God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship”.⁵

The theology of accompaniment is the idea of walking alongside someone on their journey. It is not about leading, but more about guiding. This allows the person to have an authentic faith experience. If youth become more engaged in the Gospels, then they will want to continue that journey in a nonthreatening activity like retreats. The journey starts with dogma and church teachings but must continue through evangelization and spiritual experience. According to Schneiders, “Hermeneutics means ‘interpretation.’ It can refer either to the *practice* of interpretation or to the *theory* that comes to realization in the practice of interpretation. The road to meaning is interpretation, which we have seen, is a dialectic between explanation and understanding. One can read the text primarily for information or transformation, that is to be intellectually enlightened or to be personally converted.”⁶

A theology of accompaniment is a moment of grace if approached as an exercise in servanthood. Each serves the other and together they encourage communion with God. A retreat in its natural setting is the perfect opportunity for accompaniment on all levels. According to Elizabeth Johnson the theology of accompaniment involves people and creation when approached open heartedly. For her this is the true fulfilment of the theology of accompaniment,

Bringing creation into the picture, it is not hard to see how such an accompaniment theology can also embrace the natural world. Today’s science has made it abundantly clear that a deep relationality runs through the whole cosmos...opening up our faith convictions to the all-merciful God who loves the earth, therefore, becomes

⁵ Bill Huebsch, *The Art of Accompaniment* (New London: Twenty-third Publications, 2017), 13.

⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 13, 17.

conversation with not only intellectual but emotional, spiritual, and ethical dimensions...Pope Francis writes that we will start to 'feel intimately united with all that exists' (LS 11).⁷

Allowing youth to develop their own faith will allow them to make that faith their own. When there is ownership, they will fight to remain in the church. It must be personal to be important. This does not mean they discard dogma and church teaching. It does, however, mean that they need to connect to their faith to feel ignited to learn about it. If learning is going to happen, then youth need the freedom to ask questions, about anything, without fear of recrimination or judgement. Once they have a strong theological foundation, then youth can theoretically continue the journey on retreat. This is where it needs to be more individualized. The retreat format is created for the whole group but the way the retreatant experiences it is unique to each youth and we should never interfere with the Spirit's ability to inspire the youth. Meeting a youth where they are in discipleship is crucial to the result of that youth's faith journey. Both are responsible to accompany. The youth must accompany the leader, director or clergy and they in turn must journey with the youth. The responsibility of accompaniment lies with all involved. This was the example that Jesus himself showed us in his ministry. There are so many stories in scripture that are examples of the theology of accompaniment. I would like to focus on three well known Jesus stories: The Centurion's Daughter, The story of Zacchaeus and The Road to Emmaus.

In Matthew 8:5-13, Jesus finds himself in Capernaum, a small fishing town in Galilee. There he encounters a Roman Centurion who asks Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus is very willing to do so and asks where the centurion lives so that he may go to heal the servant. The

⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 159, 197.

centurion says, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." Jesus is amazed at the faith of this man who is not Jewish and not a follower yet still has a tremendous amount of faith in Jesus' healing abilities. Jesus heals the servant right then and there. Jesus is not interested in dogma or religious authority, he is interested in being of service to anyone who comes to him for healing, be it physical or spiritual. I am sure this event shifted the centurion's perspective on not only Jesus but also Jesus' mission.

In Luke 19: 1-10 Jesus is journeying through Jericho and he encounters Zacchaeus, a tax collector. Because of his short stature, Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore tree to see Jesus more clearly and to see what all the commotion is over this man known as Jesus. Jesus notices him and invites himself to Zacchaeus' house for a meal. This brings about grumblings from the crowds because Zacchaeus is a tax collector, the worst kind of person. His profession did not bother Jesus. What Jesus saw was someone going to extreme lengths to get to know him, to encounter him. Because of this Jesus reaches out to accompany Zacchaeus, as he is, to show him the grace of God.

The last example is the Walk to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35. After Jesus' resurrection two disciples (one named Cleopas and the other unnamed) are walking to Emmaus when they are joined by a third person (Jesus-although they do not recognize him). They talk to him about their sadness over the past events and then they invite him to eat with them. Only at dinner after having spent much time with them do they recognize him as Jesus. It would have been quite easy for Jesus to identify himself from the beginning and to guide the conversation towards hope and joy, but he did not do that. He allowed them to come to awareness on their own time. It was their journey not his. He respected their need to become cognizant on their own timetable and he did not push his agenda upon them. This is the gift

of accompaniment which potentially brings about a transformative change in the heart and mind of a person known as metanoia. This cannot be forced or driven, it must happen naturally. Father James Martin, SJ puts it clearly when he states,

Jesus was willing to be with, stand with, and befriend all these people who would have felt themselves as either on the margins or outside the margins of first-century Jewish society in Galilee and Judea...He brought those on the outside in...Jesus' message was always one of inclusion, communicated through speaking with people, healing them, or offering them what biblical scholars call "table fellowship"-that is, dining with them, a sign of welcome and acceptance in first-century Palestine...He was creating a sense of "us". For with Jesus, there is no us and them. There is only us...for Jesus it is most often about *community* first-meeting, encountering, including-*and conversion second*.⁸

Jesus' ministry was to be inclusive of all people. To accompany them as a partner in the journey. For that to happen, we must be willing to walk with, listen to, and be compassionate with the other. This goes both ways. It is not just only up to leadership to understand youth. Youth must also understand leadership and all the responsibilities that come with being a leader. For decades we have been trying to move forward as a church that values both the institution as well as the laity. With the inception of Vatican II the focus was to become a more inclusive church and to value what everyone brings to the table. Have we misinterpreted the Spirit of Vatican II? Have we become so polarized as a church that we are no longer willing to work together to idealize the Gospel message? Are we all guilty of pushing our own agendas without trying to understand the other's agenda?

When Vatican II was put into play, it seemed that a breath of fresh air had been felt in the church. Moving from Latin to the language of the people, turning the altar around, allowing more lay ministers to serve, it became evident that the church was moving forward in a more pastoral direction. Some feel that perhaps we have gone too far and have forsaken

⁸ James Martin, SJ., *Building a Bridge* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2018), 69-71.

the dogma and Tradition of the church for a lackadaisical approach that is not adherent to who we are as a faith people. Those who want to restore (restorationists) what has been lost are fighting to bring the church back in line with what Vatican II was supposed to have accomplished. What is at stake is the interpretation of Vatican II which many say has become too individualistic according to whoever is in charge. “Whatever the merits and demerits of the two sides, this controversy puts before us in a new, clear, and dramatic way a problem that has dogged Vatican II all along: its interpretation... On the surface there is in the documents no explicit and straightforward indication that any change was being made in procedures, discipline, doctrine, or ecclesiastical style... Nevertheless, it still poses a major interpretative problem...”⁹

The Vatican Council faced a social, political, and spiritual dilemma. How would the Roman Curia deal with all the historical and social unrest of the sixties and still remain faithful to the institutional church founded on the Gospel of Jesus? How would they maintain their authority and allow the laity to have more presence and voice in the church? Pope John the XXIII was to lead a group of men with extremely different agendas and still try to maintain focus for Vatican II infused by the Spirit. This was no small task.

John XXIII faced a daunting task. The First Vatican Council had given the Pope powers akin to those of an absolute monarch. But his directions required people to carry them out. And those people ran the Vatican. They were an introverted and sclerotic bureaucracy, the Roman Curia. However pious and well meaning, in the words of the future Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, their attitude to change was an “almost neurotic denial of all that was new. “Moreover, during the 1950s the Church did not apparently have very much of relevance to say to the world outside, *as extra*-at least no one paid much attention-nor much capacity for internal reform, *ad intra*, the two categories within an emerging framework for the Second Vatican Council. To a great degree it was Pope John’s faith and trust that generated that capacity, or at least acted as its starter-motor.”¹⁰

⁹ John W. O’Malley, S.J., “Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?”, *Theological Studies* 67, (2006): 6.

¹⁰ Ian Linden, *Global Catholicism Towards a New Church* (London: Hurst & Company, 2012), 45-46.

The Second Vatican Council changed the trajectory of many of the traditions in the institutional church. In the United States it was accepted and put into place. Not all were in favor of the changes but over time it became the norm and the church moved forward as it always does. The faithful continued to support and those who struggled within the church's institution either remained or left to find fulfillment elsewhere. One of the great movements in the West was the inclusion of youth into church in a more comprehensive way. Youth Ministries and activities geared toward youth became commonplace and by the time I became a Youth Minister in 2005, it was a large part of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles' focus. To welcome and utilize youth into a more visible presence in the church was one of the goals in place. There were those who still wanted to go back to a more conservative view of the church but that was met with much resistance in the West. The tension could be felt at youth rallies, pastoral meetings, and parish councils. For many years, the thrust of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles had a modern and inclusive perspective on youth, and it was a great time to be a Youth Minister. However, with the Los Angeles installation of Archbishop Gomez in 2010, it was clear that we were subtly heading toward a more conservative view of the church and the activities we enjoyed as leadership and youth were being threatened.

As a member of the Youth Day Liturgical Committee for ten years I can say firsthand that when Archbishop Gomez came on board in Los Angeles many changes were made to restore the 'dignity' of Liturgy. Liturgical dance was not included within the liturgy anymore, all skits had to be approved by the Archbishop to make sure they were canonically correct, and no youth could share their testimonies anymore during the homily because it interfered with the Archbishop's intent for his homiletic message. This did not seem in line with what the Second Vatican Council had in mind when focusing on youth.

The growth of their (youth) social importance demands from them a corresponding apostolic activity; and indeed their natural character inclines them in this direction. Carried along by their natural ardor and exuberant energy, when awareness of their own personality ripens in them, they shoulder responsibilities that are theirs and are eager to take their place in social and cultural life. If this enthusiasm is penetrated with the spirit of Christ...a very rich harvest can be expected from it...Adults should be anxious to enter into friendly dialogue with the young, where, despite the difference in age, they could get to know one another and share with one another their own personal riches...and though by nature inclined to favor what is new, they will have due esteem for praiseworthy traditions.¹¹

The spirit of the Vatican II documents was to begin to close the divide between the hierarchy of the church and the laity. Many of the Vatican II documents dealt with the responsibilities of hierarchy, "Priests should, therefore, occupy their position of leadership as men who do not seek the things that are their own but the things that are Jesus Christ's"¹², and the laity, "'people of God...who share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world."¹³ This is a good thing. Working together we can make the church stronger. We all have gifts, and we need to appreciate those gifts. The hierarchy has gifts to give the laity and the laity has gifts for the hierarchy of the church. That is the beauty of being people of God. We need to build communities where we all benefit.

By virtue of the whole people participating in Christ's prophetic office, the laity's "sense of the faith" is a crucial source and criterion for discerning the signs of the times. Of course, the *sensus laicorum* is not to be equated totally with the *sensus fidelium*. The whole body of the faithful, "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" (LG, 12), are the subjects of the *sensus fidei fidelium*. But, nevertheless, the *sensus licorum* is a vital source and criterion for discerning the *sensus fidelium*, since Christ fulfills his prophetic office not only through the hierarchy but also through the

¹¹ Austin Flannery, O.P., "Young People," in *Vatican Council, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport: Costello Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), Volume 1: 780.

¹² Austin Flannery, O.P., "Relation of Priests with Lay People," in *Vatican Council, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport: Costello Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), Volume 1: 880.

¹³ Austin Flannery, O.P., "The Laity," in *Vatican Council, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport: Costello Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), Volume 1: 388.

laity whom He made His witness and to whom He gave understanding of the faith...and an attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily life daily social and family life. (LG, 35)¹⁴

This is the Spirit and the letter of the Vatican Council documents. It was meant to place all of God's people on a mission to move the church forward and to use the gifts that are God given for the prosperity of the faithful. Working together is the crux of Vatican II. If we work together and value each other, our church communities will thrive. It cannot be a trickle-down method anymore. As Richard Rohr states, "We don't need pyramids; we need circles. Pyramids don't create community; circles do."¹⁵

Many restorationists of Vatican II challenge the spirit of the document with the letter of the document. What was written versus what was interpreted? Restorationists feel that the spirit and the letter of Vatican II have become much too flexible and because of that, many churches have begun to have a 'we can do what we want' attitude as far as church Tradition and teachings. The concerns of restorationists have been amplified in youth ministry, where because of rapidly changing social issues, we have had to address subjects that simply were not in play when the Vatican II documents were written. The spirit and the letter should not be separate entities but rather should be looked at as two sides of the same issue. A hermeneutical look at Vatican II does not mean we are just looking at the words written for clarity. The spirit of the document is as important as the words on the document, "...it is not legitimate to separate the 'spirit' from the 'letter' of the Council...Interpretation of 'the spirit

¹⁴ Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 83.

¹⁵ Richard Rohr, *Simplicity, The Freedom of Letting Go* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 52.

of the Council' (what the Council intended) and interpretation of 'the letter' (the texts of the Council) are interrelated tasks. They exist in the relationship of a hermeneutical circle".¹⁶

Youth are more comfortable with an individualistic, affirming type of church where the dogma and doctrine give way to a person's faith journey. They are still faithful to the core beliefs but have a need to experience God on a personal level and for this reason retreats are a fertile opportunity for them to integrate both if allowed. Our youth will one day be the elders of the church and we need to give them a place now for them to grow in their faith and to explore and discuss their concerns and uncertainties. Retreats can do this. Issues that concern the youth today should be addressed in retreats without fear of recrimination or judgement by a director, leader, or clergy. Issues such as sexuality, LGBTQ+ issues, race issues, reproductive freedom, female empowerment in the church and more should and need to be addressed within retreats. Youth need retreats more than ever and yet youth ministry and Catholic schools often offer an experience that is inadequate and antiquated. This is due in part to a lack of training on all levels of ministry.

To have a successful retreat system, you need to get to know the youth. Who are they? Where do they come from? What are their struggles, successes, and anxieties? Only when you spend time with them on their terms, can you begin to help them or guide them on their faith journey. There must be less fragmentation and more solidarity within retreats in our parishes and schools. In my experience youth crave a spiritual life but they just don't know how to achieve it. We as the mentors and adults in their life need to model a strong faith life that is accessible to them. Our directors, leaders, clergy and religious need to reach out to youth on *their* turf and become part of *their* lives. They need to be allowed to bring

¹⁶ Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 49.

themselves completely to any retreat with their insecurities, sins, questions, sexuality and most importantly their need for a church to embrace and love them through the journey. “Servant leadership is about inviting people to change without forcing them to think the way we do, and authentic discipleship is life centered on God inclusive of all people and standing in right relationship with everyone”.¹⁷

All are called to serve not only God but each other. We need to engage with each other to serve them in the ways *they* need. That’s why it is important for the laity to understand the clergy and vice versa. “they (priests) must discover with faith, recognize with joy, and foster with diligence the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity...the faithful (laity) for their part ...should help them (clergy) as far as possible by prayer and active work so that they may be better able to overcome difficulties and carry out their duties with greater success”.¹⁸ Retreats are an opportunity to get to know each other on a deeper and more intimate level. When our defenses are down, we are more apt to connect to each other through our own experience, strength, and hope. Retreats can be fertile ground for this type of exchange between youth, adults, and clergy. One of the most successful formats for this type of retreat is inspired by Ignatian Spirituality that has been used by many Retreat Directors.

Unbeknownst to me my retreat formats were very Ignatian in spirit. St. Ignatius was a complicated man with a varied past. He originally wanted to have fame within the King’s court as a soldier but after an injury that shattered his leg, spiritual conversion began. In

¹⁷ Richard Gula, *Just Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 24.

¹⁸ Austin Flannery, O.P., “Relation of Priests with Lay People,” in *Vatican Council, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport: Costello Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), Volume 1: 880-881.

convalescence he began to read stories of the saints and to be moved by their conversions. After a long solo retreat at Manresa he formulated the Spiritual Exercises which is a retreat format that is still in use today. In its simplest form, it is a four-week (not always a calendar four weeks) process that allows the seeker (retreatant) to be accompanied by the guide (retreat leader). The key to the success of this type of retreat is to allow the seeker to go at their own pace and the guide is to go along on the journey but not to push them in any specific direction. This is key to the spiritual exercises:

The director's role is that of being helper to us in retreat...the director helps by suggesting the matter to be considered in a prayer period, and does not hinder God's movements in us by imposing interpretations of scripture and theology...we as retreatants, will profit far more from the understanding and love aroused by the grace of God within us than from the rhetoric or brilliant insights of a retreat director...a director always provide the balance for us...the director is not the one who urges a particular decision...the director facilitates the movement of God's grace within us so that the light and love of God inflame all possible decisions and resolutions about life situations...God is the director of our retreat and the human director never should provide a hindrance to such an intimate communication.¹⁹

Youth retreats are communal, but the journey is personal. It is about the retreatant and God. "A theology of accompaniment focuses on the saving presence of the gracious and merciful God, freely and faithfully given through thick and thin."²⁰ Once a youth feels safe and accepted, the possibilities of a spiritual conversion is remarkably high. It is crucial for the retreat director, leaders, and clergy to understand the delicate balance for those youth who come to retreats hesitant and unsure of what they may experience. The youth who are comfortable in a retreat setting and have a solid faith come to a retreat to simply ignite their faith further. For the uncertain demographic of youth who are hesitant, uncertain, and

¹⁹ David L. Fleming, S.J., *Draw Me into Your Friendship the Spiritual Exercises Literal Translation & a Contemporary Reading* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2016), 5, 15.

²⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross the Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 159.

fragile, allowing them to feel safe is sacrosanct to a successful retreat experience for them. It is tremendously important that those who facilitate and lead retreats for youth understand their place in the process.

Youth have so much to offer and all youth should be allowed to grow and mature in their faith at their own speed. We owe them the freedom and autonomy to do that. As directors, leaders, and clergy we need to have a strong sense of where we fit in their journey. There is no place for ego, and we need to be willing to learn and grow as well. Servant leadership is not easy to achieve. It requires sensitivity, awareness, and willingness. Overseeing retreats has so many components to monitor. It is not always easy to remember that your main purpose as a leader is to facilitate not to dictate. Youth need to be sensitive to the pressures that leaders and clergy are under and accompany them as well. We all want the same outcome; a successful and spiritual experience for youth to get closer to God. It all comes down to love, love of God, love of Spirit, love of ministry and love of youth. When the theology of accompaniment is successful evangelization is possible. “An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life”.²¹

Imagine if we were to all come together and accompany each other in our churches? If families, young people, clergy, leadership, and religious were willing to be accompanied, we could learn so much from each other. Community was the foundational element of Jesus with his apostles and then with the apostles and those who were believers. Retreats are one of the best ways to experience accompaniment. I have seen transformation, metanoia, conversion, and transcendence on retreats. I believe they are the single most transformative

²¹ Bill Huebsch, *The Art of Accompaniment* (New London: Twenty-third Publications, 2017), 45.

activity we have for youth as they integrate who they are in this world as faithful people. We must continue to help them accept who they are within the institutional church. We need to model faith and to allow youth to grow in faith. "Servant leadership is about inviting people to change without forcing them to think the way we do, and authentic discipleship is a life centered on God inclusive of all people and standing in right relationship with everyone".²² How can we help directors, leaders, and clergy become effective on youth retreats? I would argue that more training is necessary.

Plan Component

The theology of accompaniment should be a foundational component of ministry training. Teachers, ministers, directors, coaches, clergy, administration, etc. should all be trained in the theology of accompaniment. Understanding the potential effect we can have on our youth has been lost. These are not just jobs, they are vocations. Proper training and subsequent professional development would ensure that in theory, at least, we are all on the same theological page. Ministry work is so important, and it allows a place for our youth to form and develop their faith. Ministry work with youth be it youth ministry, campus ministry, or retreat ministry should be given its proper respect within the church structure. Those who lead and direct retreats for youth should have available to them training, professional development, and financial security. This must start at the top and trickle down. I would stress that the Archdiocese of Los Angeles must look at the programs in place for training and be willing to overhaul the structure for a more comprehensive vocation.

²² Richard Gula, *Just Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 24.

Whether a person works in a school or parish, the fact that youth ministers and retreat directors are over worked and underpaid is a huge problem. Burn out is the number one reason for the quick turnover of these dedicated employees. I loved being a youth minister in my parish and a retreat director at the high school where I taught. I simply could not maintain either job because the demands were, at times, unreasonable and the pay was substandard. As a youth minister, I was paid minimum wage and I was on an hourly pay schedule. My first pastor was very generous allowing me overtime and bonuses which is exceedingly rare but when the next pastor was put in place, I was no longer allowed to work overtime and the bonuses stopped coming which is the more common practice. However, my job description did not change. I still had to do the same amount of work in less time with less financial security. It became increasingly impossible to maintain this job with the money I was making. In the high school where I was a full-time religion teacher, I found it was no better. When I began as a retreat director in the high school setting, I was teaching five classes and facilitating seventeen retreats a year. I was only offered a stipend for the retreats which by comparison to others in ministry was incredibly low. Every year, at my contract meeting, I asked for a class remission (teaching one less class so I could focus on retreats more but with no decrease in pay) and was denied every year. This also became unsustainable. There must be a better way and I would argue that it needs to start at the top. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles needs to listen to the needs of youth ministers, retreat directors, and clergy. Retreat ministry leaders need to be better trained. They need to be paid a salary that would allow them to truly make this a career choice instead of a part time job, and they need to be treated like professionals. This could happen in small steps.

The first step I would propose is a task force implemented with Archbishop Gomez in the Los Angeles Archdiocese to meet the needs of these ministers within the parishes and schools where they work. If ministers could voice their concerns and offer suggestions for improvement, they would begin to feel respected and listened to. After all, these ministers are on the front lines and they know firsthand what the needs are for successful ministry. The task force would have to be diverse from all over Los Angeles. Affluent parishes and schools as well as less advantaged parishes and schools would need to be represented. It should be diverse in gender, location, socio economic strata, culture, and education. On the task force should be youth ministers, retreat directors, campus ministers, clergy involved in retreats and even youth. This would make the task force valid and realistic for the job at hand.

Once a committee is in place the first discussion should turn to training. The Archdiocesan Youth Ministry Training is, in my opinion, inadequate. It is a program that deals with the surface of youth ministry and much of the praxis taught really cannot be utilized in most parishes. I learned more about youth ministry by meeting with other youth ministers than in my training that took two years of my life to complete. The certification training is necessary to validate the career of youth minister, but the classes need to be overhauled. The sessions on retreat should go more into depth about how to create a retreat, how to accompany the youth, how to train the clergy that will support these retreats, how to pick chaperones, leaders, and adults to help facilitate retreats, how to find retreat centers and all the financial and legal details involved in holding a retreat with youth. A large portion of training should deal with the theology of accompaniment. There should also be ongoing professional development. L.A. Congress and the regional mini congresses must add topics

on accompaniment with youth and more topics on retreats other than the “Retreat 101” sessions they always offer with the same facilitator giving the same information. The job of youth minister and retreat director needs to be looked at as a career and should have all the respect that goes with this type of profession.

The second step is compensation. Salary should be commensurate to the job at hand. As a teacher within the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, my salary is determined on the Archdiocesan scale of employment. In its simplest description, I am paid according to the level of education I have and the number of years I have been employed by the archdiocese. I would argue that parish youth ministers should be part of this scale, as well. If a person is receiving higher education in the field of youth ministry or a comparable program (such as a master’s program) and has been employed for a few years, then they should be compensated for that in a way that allows ministry work to be their only job not a part time job on the side. All youth ministers should be salaried. To work on an hourly wage just opens the door to disregard for the job. In the high schools, campus ministry positions should be a full-time position. You should not be teaching a full load of classes and doing campus ministry on the side. If we are truly going to invest in the Catholic identity of our schools, then respect must be paid (figuratively and literally) to those who spend countless hours forming that identity. How can ministers possibly accompany our youth on their faith journey when they are overworked, underpaid, understaffed, and overall disrespected for the work they do? It is an issue that must be addressed by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. We are losing far too many capable and committed ministers that want to accompany youth through faith.

The third step is respect within the ministry community. In most cases, a retreat director is a trained professional who knows what they are doing. There should be a level of

autonomy involved in this position. Decisions on what formats to use, which clergy to involve, and how to handle the many delicate issues that come up should fall into the realm of the retreat director's job description. What brought me to this topic was a priest who completely disregarded the retreat format that had been used for decades without even consulting the director. This is unacceptable. Clergy is an invited position on a retreat. They are not in charge, the director is. Administration should always back the director for continuity of the program to survive. This goes back to training. Administration, clergy, and retreat directors need to each understand their job description and then have the humility to work together for the youth. To accompany the youth should always be at the forefront of any retreat.

I realize this proposal is a tall order. In steps it could be implemented over a three-year period. Each year could focus on each step. Change takes time, but youth are not benefitting from the existing structure. This proposal could change a major part of ministry and be instrumental in not only bringing our youth back to church but also in creating a strong trained vocation for accompanying them along the way. If we want the pews filled with youth, then let them feel wanted, appreciated, and loved for who they are at any given time.

We all want a church that is faith filled and dedicated to God and his teachings. Even the chaplain that was not willing to change, I'm sure, felt he was doing the right thing for his church. He certainly was not trying to hurt anyone and yet that is exactly what happened. We need to be in dialogue with each other if we want sustainable progress. Progress does not mean letting go of our history and Traditions. It simply means inclusivity to all people and to issues of today. As a church we are suffering because we are so fragmented, but all

hope is not lost. I believe that change is possible, and I pray for that change to happen. Imagine what a church we would have if all people of all demographics worked together for the mission of the church. What an incredible church that would be.

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