

In the Heartland

Addressing the Faith of the Young

Startling statistics emerged from a study of the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life in 2008. The study found:

48% of Catholics who are now unaffiliated left the Church before reaching age 18

An additional three in ten people left the Catholic Church as young adults between ages 18 and 23.

Only a fifth of those who are now unaffiliated and one-third who are now Protestant left the Church after turning 24.

These particular numbers lend credence to the priority that we in the Diocese of Des Moines are attaching to adolescent and young adult catechesis.

Our catechetical team under the leadership of John Gaffney is working closely to introduce in the 48 diocesan parishes which currently do not have such, an adolescent catechesis program or comprehensive youth ministry for our high school youth. At the same time efforts are in place to strengthen the programs in the 35 parishes that do.

Dowling Catholic High School is freeing up its extra curricular programs on Wednesday evenings in order to provide quality time for all parish youth to grow in their faith. A central part of the parish programs is the conferral of Confirmation to sophomores in high school and older. The students are much more mature at this phase in their lives and more receptive to the power of the sacrament and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In addition, they realize to a greater degree what a commitment to faith means.

Parents are also claiming the rightfully significant place for religion and its life-long importance in the lives of their children by emphasizing Sunday worship, participating in the preparation of the Sacrament of Confirmation for their children and being more conscious of the importance of witness in their lives and the impact such witness has on their children. We all enjoy sports and other extra-curricular activities as well as the value of a teenage job. But many are beginning to see the relative importance of these activities to one's faith development.

Moving from high school to colleges, universities and continuing education is also a critical moment in faith growth as personal choice and independence emerge for our young people. The first three weeks of college life have a remarkable impact on the total four years of higher education. The friends that students meet and the associations they form in this brief time usually prevail over the course of their college time. A highly important association is that of Catholic campus ministry and the Newman Centers at our universities for our young people. Iowa and its neighboring states have strong, effective

programs that can be very influential in the church-life if our children join them. Parents, grandparents and aunts and uncles make a difference by encouraging their college students to take advantage of these resources. I suggest they also make an intentional visit to these centers whenever you are on campus.

Father Joel McNeil, pastor of St. Catherine of Siena Parish, along with individuals associated with programs of higher learning, has developed a plan to establish or enhance campus ministry programs at the institutions of higher learning located in the Diocese of Des Moines. The effects of this program are evident locally at Drake University where the student enrollment at St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Student Center/Drake Newman Community has doubled to 400 over the course of the past couple of years. Another influential force at Drake University and Grand View University has been the arrival of FOCUS (Friends of Catholic University Students) on campus. Each year a team of four recently graduated students commit themselves to ministry among peers on campus. The recipients of their outreach have told me that the relationships they have formed with the FOCUS team have been enormously valuable.

Serving young Catholic adults who take on entry level jobs in Des Moines is also a focus of the diocese through programs at St. Francis and St. Theresa parishes, Theology on Tap and NOVOS a young adult program sponsored by the diocese. Our Marriage Ministry office is also continually working to strengthen pre-marital programs to enrich preparation for life-long commitment in the sacrament of marriage.

Young people are obviously very busy and as has always been the case, have a multitude of activities and interests fueled by the robust energy they possess. Nonetheless, in the interest of establishing and maintaining the foundation of their lives that will ensure quality, meaning, and eternal significance, it is necessary to give priority to their faith and religious development. In the Diocese of Des Moines we are grateful for the involvement of all sectors of our community who are contributing to significantly grow these efforts.