

## A RESPONSE TO "AMERICAN YOUTH AND THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH"

I shall try to keep these reflections and "reactions" brief so that all of you may have ample time to present your own reflections on the paper of Rev. Whitney Evans. Though it is not perhaps pedagogically wise to say it, I do not consider myself an expert on either American youth or the institutional Church. And my present job even makes me something of a stranger to pastoral reflection! For the sake of clarity, I must say that these remarks are based on the written paper of Rev. Evans, which he kindly submitted to me almost a month ago.

1. As I read and studied the paper I found myself frequently nodding in agreement. In fact, I wrote the author a note to the effect that I wished he hadn't been so balanced in his approach. If he had taken the position of a "hard-hat conservative" or a "fuzzy liberal" my job would have been easier! But his balance, obviously born of experience and study, shines through his paper and seems to me to be worthy of both consideration and imitation. In addition to balance, the paper is a model of synthesis. Rev. Evans covered the field extremely well in a relatively short space. I congratulate him on his precision of thought and expression.

Finally, before moving to a negative stance, let me recommend to all the fine references contained in the footnotes of this paper. The author not only shows his awareness of the important literature on this topic, he uses the material in an intelligent and critical way. I urge those who wish to pursue this topic on their own to begin with E's bibliography.

2. Turning now to my role as devil's advocate, I would state as my major reservation about the paper the following proposition: It seems to me that the author has concentrated too much on what he refers to as "the avant-garde, pace-setting youth" and not enough on the average run-of-the-mill youth.

On page 191 E states: "In offering these pastoral reflections on how the institutional Church might respond to the new social ma-

turity of young persons in general and to the intellectual and moral precocity of the avant-garde, pace-setting youth in particular, I have dwelt upon issues which the 'brain trusts' and middle management of Catholicism can take up."

I firmly believe that the avant-garde and pace-setting youths are worthy of a great deal of consideration. But I also believe that there are vast differences in the various categories of youths that one might assemble. Let me hasten to point out that E does make reference to other than college-oriented youth, and let us further understand that to say anything meaningful about such a huge group as "American youth" is extremely difficult for anybody. What I want to call attention to here is that some of the points which E emphasizes in his pastoral suggestions are perhaps much more valuable for an *educated* and *idea-oriented* group than they would be for some of the sweet "children of the street."

3. Concerning the first major part of E's paper, "Youth Now," I will make several observations.

The first is in the form of a question. Is it true, as E states, that "this generation of the young, or a good proportion of it . . . has grown up in homes where a democratic family structure has replaced an authoritarian one . . ." (p. 173)? I for one would like to believe that this is true and that it does account for some of the attitudes and values of the young. Yet one does hear another explanation: the young are truly *in rebellion* against the authoritarian structures which still exist, though more subtly, in their homes, schools and churches. E's analysis is one that would give more hope to our present situation. My hope is that his analysis is true.

Secondly, E states on p. 175: "Young persons tend to accept and live by the values their parents have transmitted to them." This used to be a rather commonly accepted sociological generalization. My recollection of introductory sociological textbooks is that part of the socialization process is described in this way: the young go through a period when they rebel against their parents' values in a highly verbal and external way, but this is nothing to be disturbed about because ordinarily, when they themselves become married and take on responsibilities, they return to the values of their parents. One

common example used to be the young man who came from a stalwart Republican home, went to college and was exposed to some liberal social ideas, voted Democratic his first time around, but then in subsequent elections was back in the Republican fold.

E quotes a number of studies which insist that the sociological generalization still holds true, and particularly in reference to political activism. The theory is that activism, even radical activism, is "not a revolt but a result. Activist youth are not in rebellion against the older generation as such." (p. 175). Again, I would find comfort in believing this. And since I do not have any real facts to argue otherwise, I should perhaps say nothing more. But if I had to give my "gut reaction" to this view, I would say that the opposite is closer to being true, that young people in large numbers are consciously rebelling against the values of the older generation and that this accounts for the ever-widening gap between the generations.

In matters of religion, E himself seems to indicate that the general theory of parental value interiorization does not hold up. (p. 179). Surely the religious alienation of youth, or at least their alienation from organized religion, would have to be described in my judgment as a revolt and not a result. My view would be that the older generation of Americans who belonged to the organized religious bodies were not as imbued or concerned with authentic religious values as they were with external religious practices. In a simpler America it was possible to pass on the practices even if the values did not go very deep. The young today—perhaps because they are better educated or more aware of the world or more critical—tend to reject the practices. I am not as sanguine as some observers that they also tend to seek out the authentic values missing in their parents.

4. Concerning the second major part of E's paper, "Some Pastoral Reflections", I have just a few observations.

First, E states that "a considerable body of evidence today suggests that young persons are giving up on the churches." E cites a number of studies in support of this generalization. We seem to hear this with some regularity these days. Though I am not comfortable with such predictions as "by 2010 A.D. no students will be going

to Church." I have no great reason for challenging the generalization.

E rightly distinguishes between the religious views or religious experiences of young people and their lack of regard for the institutionalized religious forms. "The institution as bugaboo" has been featured so frequently over the past five years or so that one wonders what more can be said about it.

If I may submit another "gut reaction," it might be this: we tend to take young people too seriously in their views on institutions. It is my conviction that only a certain amount of experience of real life, which demands at least a reasonable number of years of life, teaches us the positive values of institutions. Perhaps youth is the necessary time to oppose institutions to some degree; perhaps we should listen more seriously to their opposition, so that the institutions can be purified.

A second point: I think E is correct when he says that "one of the greatest sources of division between the majority of clergy and older Catholics on the one hand, and thousands of young Catholics on the other, is the nature of religious celebration in general and the use of popular musical forms at Mass in particular" (p. 182).

Yet E's treatment of liturgy (obviously well-informed and to me theologically beautiful) does seem perhaps to place too heavy a burden on liturgical forms. Can the liturgy bear all the weight we, as Catholics, have tried to place on it in recent years? It should be noted that many of the things E suggests have in fact been allowed and accomplished at least in relatively small groups of young people, e.g., in religious houses of formation, and on some college campuses. And yet their success or results have been questionable.

Let me at least expose a more conservative viewpoint here; namely, that liturgy is ultimately an expression of an interior attitude, the classic biblical attitudes of reverence, worship, faith, charity. If these attitudes are not strong and deep, liturgy—no matter how tangible, meaningful or engrossing—is going to wear thin quickly. I make this observation knowing that it is highly simplified, but it is perhaps worth introducing at least.

Thirdly, I like very much E's treatment of moral issues, especially the point about *guilt* among young people. I would like to

understand his point better, and perhaps others will pick it up. I might submit that the direction of Catholic moral teaching is dubious today because it does not sufficiently "supply the kind of moral absolutism that many young persons still want to measure themselves against."

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