

Dear Donatus,

I'm aware that you're seeing very few youth and young adults at your services these days. But let me assure you that even though the Gen Z crowd and the youngest millennials might have little (or no) experience of life within a church environment, many of them do possess what some have termed an "open and unformed orientation to transcendence."

That last phrase is a mouthful. It presumes a rich foundation in Christian anthropology, soteriology, Christology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology. I know you are well versed in all of that. But I dare say that your teachers did you a disservice when they ensured that you could expound the finer points of the hypostatic union, the Trinity's two processions, etc., but rarely showed how that rich theology was necessarily preceded by, and grew out of, real lived encounters between people and their God. You can design the finest church programs, complete with masterful social media, but you are not likely to succeed at drawing in Gen Z unless you begin with encounters that are "reverse engineered" from the theological truths of our Tradition. That is to say, any attempts to engage Gen Z with structured liturgy or church organizations should be preceded by theologically sound, but unscripted, encounters that intersect with their concerns.

Let's begin with that "orientation to transcendence." It flows directly from our core anthropology. In Genesis 2, the man comes to self-awareness through experiencing that he is "alone." This happens because he encounters each of the animals and finds them not like himself. Thus, the second creation account completes the first insofar as the human being not only has an *objective* reality, "in the image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:26), but also a *subjective* experience of what it means to be in relation with another. He exercises the authority which comes with that subjectivity and even deepens his self-awareness by naming the animals and yet finding none of them to be "good" partners. When the woman is created and brought to him, together they experience complementarity: man for woman and woman for man. They are reciprocal helpers and each one both gives of him/herself and receives the other as *self-gift*.

Many have pointed out that the isolation experienced by Gen Z throughout the pandemic, compounded by the impact of their nearly constant gazing into the glass screens of computer devices, has produced in them a profound disconnect from authentic human interaction. Yes, part of the solution to this isolation will be programs that encourage face-to-face engagements. But if these are to have a lasting effect, they must be grounded in the basic theology of Genesis 2. When they were in isolation during COVID, they were told it was good for their health, protecting them from dreadful possibilities (often leading to anxiety at the thought of venturing out into the world). And when they engage social media on their devices today, they happily consume it, driven by the power of marketing and the manipulation of the desire to be liked and accepted. They are rarely being helped to see that neither the isolation of the pandemic nor their faceless glass screens are "unsuitable partners" for them, and that this lack of companionship is "not good." They certainly *feel* the loneliness, but they also feel hopeless in its grasp. Any remedy for this situation should help young people experience the power of self-giving of themselves and receiving the self-giving of others.

I leave it to you and your team, Donatus, to devise what sorts of programs or actions will accomplish this most effectively. Just be true to the underlying anthropology. That's why I think that in-person programs which are designed to entertain—or even to "catechize" about the profound truths of our Tradition—will have little success if they are presented simply as products for young people to passively consume. It would reduce your ministry to a stained-glass

computer screen. The love of Christ that will compel them must be self-sacrificial or else it will not be received, embraced, and shared. There's a serious theological reason why mission trips are often so popular and powerful within campus ministry. Students will sign up driven by the desire to "do good works for the poor." But, as every campus minister knows, they are usually transformed by experiencing the self-gift they receive from the would-be recipients of their charitable acts. Just immersing themselves within the lives and families of another culture will often open them up toward new horizons and ways of being in the world (such as the reality of living with joy and gratitude amidst humble material circumstances, for example).

This openness to the possibility of being, and receiving, self-gift within the context of human relationships is the "transcendence" referred to above. Let me remind you, Donatus, of one of the seminal texts that governed the program of priestly formation during your seminary years. It is from the writing of Pope John Paul II:

*Human maturity...expresses itself in convinced and heartfelt obedience to the "truth" of one's own being, to the "meaning" of one's own existence, that is to the "sincere gift of self" as the way and fundamental content of the authentic realization of self. Thus understood, freedom requires the person to be truly master of oneself, determined to fight and overcome the different forms of selfishness and individualism which threaten the life of each one, ready to open out to others, generous in dedication and service to one's neighbor.*

There are not many influences in contemporary American culture that are helping young people "fight and overcome the different forms of selfishness and individualism." To the degree that you can help provide such an influence, you are literally helping them to become more fully human in the sense that God created them to be.

But I want to stress, Donatus, that this transcendence is not only designed to open these young people toward more authentic relationship with each other, but also toward God. And this can happen long before they ever darken the door of your church or listen to your homilies. As Christians, we understand that we are not only in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26), but that we are in the image and likeness of a God who is a Trinity of divine persons (Nicene Creed), who is love (1 John 4:8). Thus, whenever we experience love in any capacity (e.g., longing for it in the future, enjoying it in the present, or grieving the loss of having known it in the past) we are at least at the threshold of the divine presence. Beyond that, the love we experience allows us to participate in some way in the very love that the Father, Son and Spirit enjoy among themselves. So to help a young person love in a self-giving way is to open her directly to a relationship that extends beyond herself: towards other people and towards God.

Let me conclude by briefly addressing another word in the phrase we have been considering: "unformed." Just because we are created for transcendent relationship does not guarantee that we will realize that potential. Consider Ezekial's image of water flowing from the Temple. As the fresh water passes into the salty sea, it refreshes the marshes and brings new life. These estuary boundary waters form extraordinary ecosystems that abound with creative life forms. The plants and animals that flourish here are uniquely adapted to thrive in both freshwater and briny environments, with a capacity that all other life forms lack.

Now think of the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery as a sort of "spiritual estuary." Here is the boundary where the divine Trinity erupts into the sea of our creaturely humanity. The creative new life and salvation that Christ brings is the fruit of both his humanity and divinity. His own self-gift to us allows us, by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit, to love with a Trinitarian

love (cf. John 13). And that same gift of the Spirit allows us to participate in the boundary waters of Christ's Paschal Mystery, as we negotiate our own experiences of life, suffering, and rebirth.

Any young person you accompany, Donatus, will be immersed in the Paschal narrative: maybe he is joyfully grateful, perhaps he is in the throes of inconsolable suffering, or even growing into a new conversion of heart. If you can help him give of himself to others from the very core of those experiences, and also help him to receive the gift of others' love into those same experiences, then you are helping him be formed like Christ—"divinization," as they used to say. *Now* he is ready to enter your church, to encounter your "vestibule" as a true *narthex*, where the catechumens of old eagerly waited, with a deep longing, to transcend everyday life into the mystical Body of Christ, as it is to be found both within and outside of the church walls.

I know this is much easier said than done, my friend! But I have every good confidence that you will translate our rich theology into an even richer series of encounters for the young people of our times.