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Young Life grew my vision for Catholic ministry

By Amanda Jewett

In summer 2017, I attended a Young Life camp in eastern Oregon as an adult guest. I agreed to visit Washington Family Ranch not knowing much about Young Life. I was curious but did not anticipate that the experience would change the way I view youth ministry.

Similar to any summer camp, there were ropes courses, a zip line, and a swimming pool. But when it came to the program, I noticed right away that Young Life didn't assume that the 400 campers had faith in God. Young Life expected that most students didn't yet believe or were still questioning. And this assumption dictated the initial language, music and message. God wasn't mentioned a lot the first day, and all the songs were popular secular music. But over the course of a few days, God became the focus of everything. And as I looked around, I saw disconnected teens slowly become more comfortable talking about Jesus. By the end, teens were singing praise and worship songs as loudly and as passionately as they had sung the songs of Taylor Swift and One Direction. Teens were acknowledging their need for God and surrendering to Jesus.

What led to this transformation?

I watched as Young Life made it all about a relationship with Jesus first and foremost. All catechesis and faith formation follows naturally from this relationship or encounter with Christ. Without this foundation, catechesis can be lost or considered irrelevant.

Our Catholic youths need what Young Life prompts teens to develop: a relationship — not just head knowledge, not just the idea of faith — an actual relationship with the actual person of Jesus Christ, who loves us more infinitely and unconditionally than anyone else ever can. I saw Young Life reaching kids in a way I never experienced as a cradle Catholic who attended Catholic school from preschool to college, got a degree in theology, and now works for a Catholic parish. At camp, I saw an immense opportunity — an opportunity for these teens, whose lives were



The writer (far right) attends Young Life camp in eastern Oregon in 2017. It helped her see that young people need a personal relationship with Christ. (Courtesy Amanda Jewett)

being intimately touched by God's divine presence, but also an opportunity for the Catholic Church to improve its outreach to teens, especially in this day and age.

My exposure to Young Life taught me, as a Catholic, that I am called to go out, especially to the peripheries, so I can encounter teens and spread the Gospel, rather than wait for teens to come to me and my youth group. As Pope Francis has said, we are called to smell like the sheep, and I saw Young Life leaders doing this.

When watching the interactions at camp, I recognized that the Young Life leaders had real and authentic relationships with each of their kids. Prior to camp, these leaders had gone out to football games, school plays and robotics tournaments to find these teens, rather than wait for them to come meet the leaders at a Young Life club. Camp was a culmination of months of contact work and relationship building.

This is missionary discipleship. By the very nature of our baptism, we are

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called to "take on the smell of the sheep" and accompany people on their journeys to Christ. We are a missionary church, and Christ's Great Commission (Matthew 28) is at the center of that. Should our parish ministries not reflect this as well, going (not staying!) and making disciples of all nations?

Our Catholic faith holds such beauty, depth and richness, and my identity as a member of the Catholic Church is a source of personal pride and delight. For this reason, I want to learn from Young Life and become more effective in sharing my faith in Christ with teens.

At the time I was visiting the Young Life camp, my primary concerns at St. Cecilia circled around the number of kids who were attending our church youth group, how well they knew the catechism, and how heavily involved they became in the life of the parish. All of those are important and play their own roles. Yet I had lost sight of the primary goal, the "why" of Catholic ministry: Do our parish teens have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and are they on the path to sainthood? I had to ask myself a difficult question: Does our youth ministry lead our teens to information, events, and programs, or to a person?

Since my visit to camp, I have engaged with the Young Life ministry in my area. I have befriended my Young Life counterpart who serves at a local high school, and we have done contact work together at the school. I also have joined a committee of Catholics and Protestants who are shepherding a collaborative effort between Young Life and the Catholic Church to reach more kids. As a part of this committee, I helped organize three joint worship nights where Catholic youth ministers and Protestant Young Life leaders met to get to know each other. Even though we are coming from different Christian denominations, we know many of the same kids, and we need to work together if we are going to reach every kid.

I lead youth ministry in the Portland area, where few claim to be Christian. Most teenagers here are disconnected from a church, and I desire nothing more than to help them find Christ. My exposure to Young Life has inspired me to help build bridges between different Christian denominations and, more importantly, between teenagers and God. I thank God for allowing his Spirit to move in this way, and I ask that God continue to bless and guide us in this work, as we go and make disciples of all nations.

Jewett is youth and young adult minister at St. Cecilia Parish in Beaverton.