

The Promise of Pro-Life Youth

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With few resources and little guidance, Alejandra, a high school junior in California, began an unlikely project: starting a pro-life club at her public high school. She had recently finished reading *The Snakebite Letters* by Peter Kreeft, which presents the correspondence between a senior demon, Uncle Snakebite, and his nephew Braintwister. Snakebite instructs his protégé to convince young people to buy into a way of life rooted in self-centeredness, self-reliance and instant gratification. Snakebite's mandate is simple: "always obscure and darken ... Dim the lights! *Anything* is preferable to truth and light."¹ This quote resonated with Alejandra. She recognized that this was the situation at her high school: young people living in darkness because they had no truth, no guidance, and no real hope.

Pope John Paul II once described this situation of modern culture, "with its lights and shadows," as one that "ought to make us all fully aware that we are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the 'culture of death' and the 'culture of life'."² This clash is especially apparent among American youth. It begins at home with one in three teens living in a broken home. In these homes, one in six boys and one in four girls will be molested, usually by people in their family, before the age of eighteen. Over half of teenage boys view internet pornography on a regular basis, and the number of girls who do so is also rising. Not surprisingly, nearly two-thirds of high school students will be sexually active by the time they graduate. Seventy-five percent of all first-time sexual encounters involve alcohol. About half of sexually active teens will acquire a sexually transmitted disease (STD), while one in three sexually active high school girls will become pregnant, nearly one million every year. Nearly sixty percent of these pregnancies will result in abortion.

Not only that, today's youth live in a world dominated by technology. With multiple televisions at home, personal computers, digital music devices, video games, and smart phones, they spend more time using media (on average, more than six hours a day) than on any other



activity besides sleeping.³ The average 12-year-old boy, for example, will have already spent as much time watching television as he will spend talking to his dad throughout his entire life.

Media both reflect and shape culture, and the messages delivered are often contradictory and harmful. Media of all types vie to create an identity for teens (often to convince them to buy a consumer product). Teens are encouraged to pursue their goals and overcome obstacles, through mottos in such commercials as Nike's "Just Do It" or the United States Army's "Be All That You Can Be." Young people are told that if they persevere through self-discipline and dedication, they can accomplish whatever they set their minds to in academics, sports, the fine arts, and so on. But overwhelmingly, teens are also tempted to buy into the mass culture of sexual promiscuity, greed, and violence. Television shows like "Gossip Girl" or MTV's "Real World" flaunt characters trading sexual partners on a weekly basis, as if they were commodities instead of human beings.

The tension between these two extremes— between challenging teens to live disciplined and remarkable lives, and assuming they can't control their impulses and live chastely —can result in an identity crisis. Many become preoccupied with trying to live up to the inconsistent standards portrayed in the media. Not surprisingly, teens are increasingly cynical or suspicious of the role of God in their lives. As Pope Benedict

RESPECT LIFE

observes, many have the “lurking suspicion that a person who does not sin must really be basically boring and that something is missing from his life, that [they] should put this freedom to the test, even in opposition to God, in order to become” fully who they are. Believing that “God’s love creates a dependence,” they feel that “they must rid themselves of this dependency” to be totally free. Trusting in “deceit rather than truth, [they] thereby sink with their lives into emptiness and death.”⁴ Braintwister seems to be doing his job quite well!

Many teens, however, would like to do something positive. The energy, charisma, joy, and love for life that teenagers possess are too valuable to be written off or distorted by a culture of death. Centered on the message of the Gospel, young people can create a foundation of vibrant faith for those who have become discouraged by the mixed messages of a despondent society. In Pope Benedict’s first message to young people, he taught with great conviction that if “we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed.”⁵

By “entrusting ourselves to Christ,” Pope Benedict said on another occasion, “we lose nothing, we gain everything.”⁶ Nowhere is this vital energy and potential more apparent or necessary than within the pro-life movement; there is an undeniable growing commitment to the right to life among young people. A sizeable number of teens are not fazed by society’s attempts to claim their hearts and souls for the “culture of death.” Their identity is grounded in Truth, rather than in ad campaigns or the latest trends. These individuals are greatly needed to voice their unified commitment to a culture that doubts their resolve. For young people whose lives are disordered, these teens can convey a message of hope and give a testimony of love.

By taking a stand, one person can inspire a group of young people to change the attitudes of an entire high school. Alejandra decided to “turn on the lights” and reveal the truth to her fellow students. After acquiring a small donation, she bought several hundred copies of various pro-life pamphlets and passed them out at school. Fellow students reacted with curiosity and surprise as they saw, many for the first time, how a baby grows in the womb, fully recognizable as a human person at an early stage of development. They began to debate in classrooms and hallways. So much interest in

the pro-life cause had been generated that Alejandra and some eager classmates were able to find a faculty advisor and follow school protocols to start a Students for Life club. Their goal was to enlighten teens about the reality of abortion, promote openness to the reasonableness of pro-life views, and to witness so other pro-life teens would know that they were not alone. The result was a clearly discernible pro-life shift in opinions and knowledge on abortion among students at the high school.

Alejandra discovered that her high school campus was a vacuum devoid of pro-life facts, needing only the introduction of truth and an effective means (i.e., a club) to share and embody the pro-life message. Many teens don’t understand what a pro-life position entails. They simply haven’t thought about it. A simple, respectful presence can change the hearts and minds of those who are unaware of the gravity of abortion—and ultimately save lives. With a few resources, guidance, and reliance on Christ, young people will save lives in their high schools and wherever they choose to build a “culture of life.”

To learn more about starting a pro-life effort in your school, or to support young people in such efforts, visit: www.usccb.org/prolife/youth

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1 Peter Kreeft, *The Snakebite Letters* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 38.

2 John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1995), no. 28.

3 See D.F. Roberts and U.G. Foehr, “Trends in Media Use,” *The Future of Children* 18 (2008): 11-37. Available at https://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/18_01_02.pdf; accessed March 15, 2009.

4 Pope Benedict XVI, homily, December 8, 2005.

5 Pope Benedict XVI, homily, April 24, 2005.

6 Pope Benedict XVI, homily, May 26, 2006.