

Coming Down from the Mountaintop

10 Ideas for Leaders of Young People
Charles Jumonville

I applaud young people who seek mountaintop experiences offered through the church. World Youth Day certainly is one, as is the National Catholic Youth Conference, a bi-annual extended weekend program that attracts 25,000 Catholic teens throughout the United States. Catholic Leadership Institute, an intense high school program promoting life skills and practical applications of the gospel message, is another type of large-church experience that takes place in many areas around the country. Such experiences are credible and often highlight a person's faith journey. The mountaintop provides a sense of the global



church, enabling one to glimpse the vast territory that lies beyond one's own parish. International gatherings highlight the multicultural church we belong to, as well, a value in itself. As an adult who has chaperoned and led young people in international, national, diocesan, and regional experiences of church, I know that mountaintop experiences are real, affirming, and exciting. No wonder young people (and sometimes adults, too) would prefer to stay on top of the mountain. Herein lies the problem.

Life has taught most of us that we must learn to live in the valley—amid the mundane, the quotidian—keeping the mountaintop in our hearts. While peak experiences can be grand and life-giving, they cannot provide our *daily* bread. Nor can an annual or occasional banquet sustain anyone, let alone a growing young person.

As Archbishop Oscar Romero once wrote, "We need to take the long view." This view incorporates all of our faith experiences, large and small, and prods us to love and serve the Lord in a consistent, ongoing, daily journey.

What follows are ten tips for teachers and parents to help them lead young people down from the mountaintop, whether it is World Youth Day, a diocesan conference, a retreat, or any other program that leads to a spiritual high. From experience as a leader and parent, I propose ways of bringing them back to their own parish and home, which typically form their spiritual center. Ideally, parish and home are the places where daily bread is dished up consistently.

Process the experience internally.

Young people and adults often dismiss or neglect any serious interior examination of an event. Yet, true conversion of heart takes place when we examine the interior, the deep places within where the Spirit nestles. Sure it was fun to see the pope or to hang out with 600,000 people

or to backpack into the World Youth Day setting for Mass with other pilgrims, but in the end it is not the 600,000 or the fun experiences that sustain. It is the examination of the interior self. Since interior examination is a tough process, it may be helpful to provide mentors from the parish to help teens further interiorize the process. Ask for volunteers, and train them, and set up one-on-one meetings over a period of weeks or months—a kind of spiritual buddy system, but with mature adults who can listen well and allow teens to express the doubts and difficult questions they inevitably raise.

Process it within a community of friends.

It is essential to identify, articulate, and then share what one has learned from a mountaintop experience. Invite and encourage young people to share with their friends and family what they saw, sensed, and learned. Ask, How were you challenged or changed? Why was this experience so powerful? What happened at this event that makes you proud to be a part of a Catholic community? Draw out their responses, write them down, discuss them as a group. Get them talking, describing, probing interiorly.

Guide students down the mountain.

A parish staff member (even if the parish has no designated youth director) ought to gather all those students who have attended the large-church event for group debriefing. Assure them of the parish's commitment to them and their spiritual growth. Do all you can to welcome them, ensuring that they are not isolated from the community. These young people have a rich experience to share and apply, but they need guidance to see precisely how. When you gather, participants will want to describe what happened. That's good. Also ask them questions such as, Do you think your friends will see you as a

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changed person because of the experience? What are you most excited about since you returned? How can our parish benefit from your rich experience? What did you learn that could help your parish and/or family? How do you plan to help parish teens who were unable to attend?

Help them become more involved with Sunday Eucharist.

Parish leaders must show young people again and again the value of full and active participation in the liturgy, the central event in parish life. For it is through the liturgy that we Catholics are called to eucharistic action—I mean the true understanding that we are called to love and to serve, to be, as Christ was, bread for the world, our lives poured out for others. These actions of loving and serving lead us to look outward. Once nourished by Scripture and the Body and Blood of Christ, we realize more fully that Eucharist is about service, about love in action. Remind the young people that every liturgy concludes with these words: “Let us go forth to love and serve the Lord” to which the whole congregation affirms, “Thanks be to God.”

Help young people to remember the theme and use it in their daily lives.

Often, though not always, the theme of a large-scale event can be a powerful teaching tool for evangelizing young people. World Youth Day 2005 in Cologne had the theme “We have come to worship Him” (from Mt 2:2); World Youth Day in Denver, Colorado, had the theme “I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Yet once they return home, many young people forget the theme or fail to see its daily importance. A parish staff member might ask young participants to name the theme and list ways in which it is important to their lives now. For example, How can you truly “come to worship Him” right here in this parish community? What are the practical things you can do to implement this theme in your life? Make lists, set goals, encourage the young people to meet them, just as Weight Watchers helps its members meet their own self-professed goals—bit by bit.

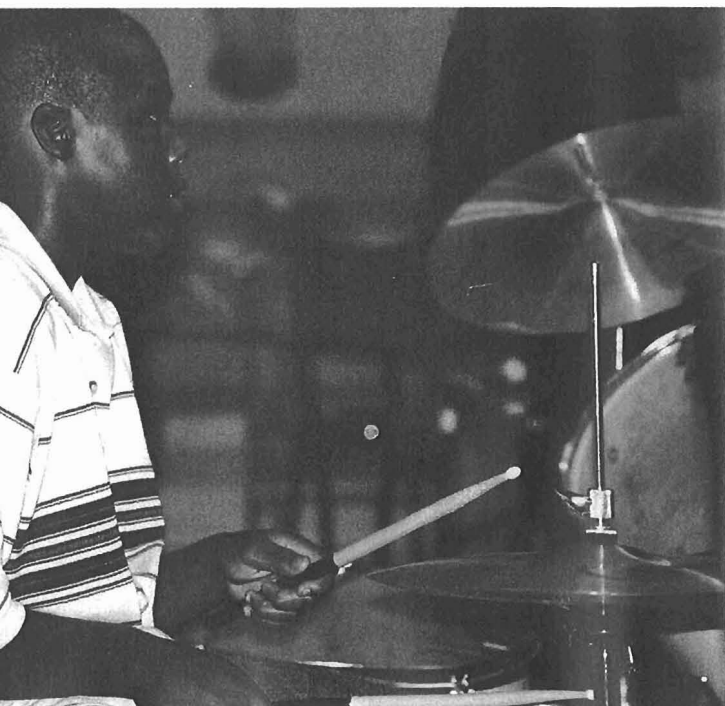


Photo: (L) Theresa Partheymuller, (R) Charles Jumonville





Link young people to the service dimension of the gospel.

As a group, think about the people in your geographical parish who are disenfranchised. Make the connection that part of the gospel message is to serve the poor, the lonely, the frail, the sick, the imprisoned, the marginalized. Look within your own parish boundaries and identify persons who could use assistance. Do we see these persons as our brothers and sisters? How can we—as a family and/or as a group of parish young people—help them?

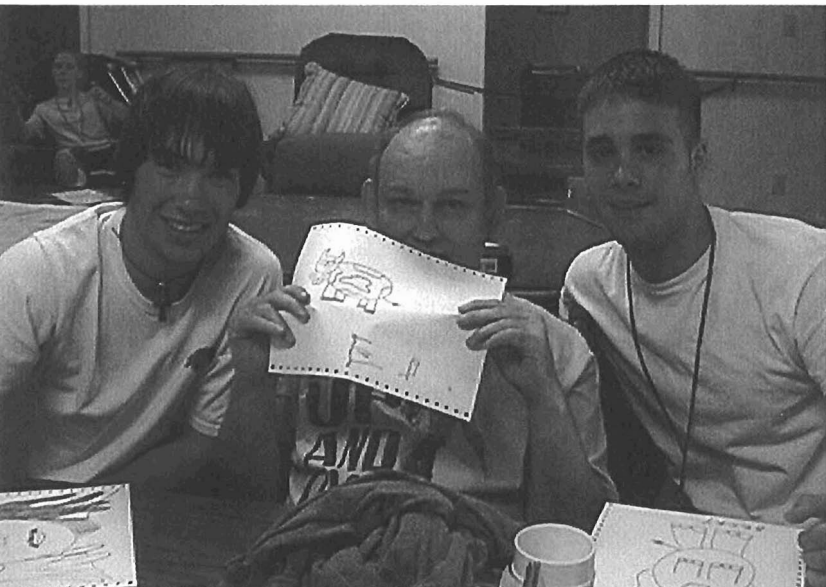
Live out the pope's message at home.

I have vivid memories of John Paul II saying, "Do not be afraid of the gospel. Be worshipers of the one true God...my dear young people do not yield to false illusions and passing fads. Seek Jesus who is the source of forgiveness and reconciliation." These words are powerful. The challenge for parish staff, teachers, volunteer leaders, and parents is to help young people live out such messages of the large-church gatherings, rather than dwelling on them simply as heartfelt memories. We must ask, What are these illu-

sions and fads? What does "yielding" to them mean? How can young people help make the parish, school, or family a place that does not yield to the false illusions and passing fads we have identified? How can young people create a more receptive place for forgiveness and reconciliation? Discuss, What is not illusory? What does not "pass away"? How can young people promote these?

Connect the pilgrims to the parish.

Many youth programs seem to have an inadvertent flaw in them—they isolate young people from the life of the parish. They take them away from it. Good experiences such as weekend retreats and seasonal trips often draw young people and their friends to an outside activity in the name of the church. These need to be counterbalanced in the parish by strong links between youth and other generational groups (such as seniors, parents raising little children, young adults ages 21-35, junior high students, and middle-aged adults). What does your parish do to create these strong, ongoing ties? Intergenerational activities, worship, discussion can take place in the parish complex or in the homes of the parishioners. How



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can the pilgrims connect to the various ministries that already exist in the parish? Will existing groups invite young people to share their experiences as guests? Can they share their story with the council of ministries, the altar society, the men's club, the parish school of religion classes, the various devotional groups in the parish, or the parish administration? Will the parish listen to them? hear their budding, enthusiastic expression of faith? encourage them on their way?

Seek diocesan and deanery support.

Often large-church experiences cross parish boundaries. You can take advantage of this by connecting young people to diocesan, deanery, and inter-parish programs, showing what is available nearer to home. Many U.S. parishes are finding support and energy in "twinning"—sharing resources and camaraderie with contiguous parishes. Why not do the same with those who experienced a large-church event—and gather an inter-parish group for a meeting and social. Dioceses

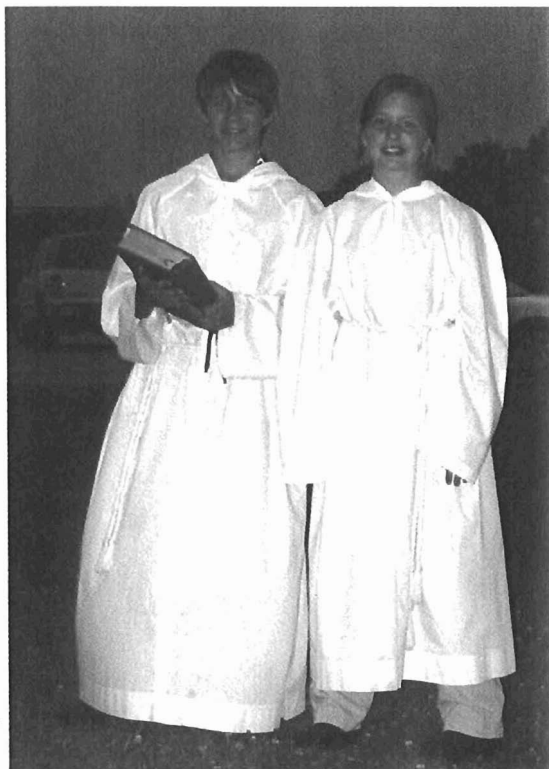
and deaneries often provide their own large-church experiences at a more reasonable cost than attending an international or national event. Encourage those young people who have never yet had such an experience to go. Such opportunities can reach more youth in the parish or diocese.

Help students remember that faith is not about a destination, but about a journey.

We should all—adults and young people—be mindful that faith is a lifelong journey punctuated typically by a few highs, a few lows, and many, many experiences of the mundane in between. Help young people to see that the very rhythm and ritual of our liturgical year remind us there is no destination, save for eternal life. We do not live on an Easter high, a Christmas high, or a Pentecost high. Rather, we live in the kerygmatic cycle that we proclaim: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

In effect, young pilgrims who have just come off an extraordinary large-church experience should be led to assess for themselves what happens between events. What does their daily experience tell them? Should we now just wait for another World Youth Day? How best can we live in between such peaks? They already know that an athletic team that wins a state championship in one year doesn't just wait until the next state championship event comes around. They prepare, practice, and play many other games each season. Our challenge is to encourage young people to find the extraordinary (God's grace present and active) in the ordinary events of life. That will sustain them for a lifetime.

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