

GROOMING YOUNG PEOPLE FOR MINISTRY: FAMILY AND SOCIETAL INFLUENCE

Cecilia OMEIFE, EHJ

Jos University Teaching Hospital
Plateau State

Abstract

Children, as we know, are very impressionable, so they deserve to be presented with what is virtuous and true during their formative years. The family and the larger society owe it a duty to influence young people positively while preparing them for their mission on earth. The truth taught to the child begins and is completed by introducing the child to God right from infancy. Parents must themselves be first of all those who uphold Christian values by their very lives so they can impact positively on the child who is now ready to be launched into the larger society. Growing up and interacting with his siblings, the young person is able to learn and acquire virtues such as: forgiveness, compassion, honesty, respect and piety and are able to uphold these as values. This learned behaviour is a positive contributory factor that can launch young person into ministry whatever state of life they choose or are called to. Society is both teacher and beneficiary of good formation of young minds and character, because it is these that in turn build and develops society. The peace and development a society enjoys is the fruit of society's investment in its citizens' moral, social and spiritual welfare particularly the training and welfare investment in its young population. Grooming young people for ministry is a worthwhile enterprise because family, church and society are the better for it to the glory of God.

Keywords: Grooming, Mentorship, Youth, Nigeria, Society, Ministry

Introduction

The concern for young people participating in the evangelical ministry of the church in response to Christ's mandate to the church to evangelize the whole world is borne out of the conviction that all – young and old alike, are invited to participate in the church's mission to evangelize the whole world. Making disciples of all nations is not in any way limited to the adult world. The church baptizes infants, making them members of the church (the Body of Christ) and Christ's disciples, therefore, children have the right to be introduced to the Christian life by their parents and all who are responsible for the formation of children so that they in turn begin to learn to share the Good News with others, starting with their peer. We cannot leave young people out of the Christian Ministry of evangelization – a mandate Jesus gave to his Church and he expects every member of his body (the Church) to be a part of it; Jesus himself said: *“Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these”* (Mt. 19:14). The Catechism of

the Catholic Church teaches that “the role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute, the right and the duty of parents to educate their children is primordial and inalienable ... showing themselves obedient to the will of the Father in Heaven. Parents educate their children to fulfil God’s law.”¹

This teaching of the Church applies to both the content of the faith, which is the light under which all other knowledge is taught, and to the moral formation of children. The duty of parents and faith Formators of young people, as laid out in Pius XI’s Encyclical on the Christian Education of Youth, “consists essentially in preparing man/woman for what he/she must be and for what he/she must do here below, in order to attain the sublime end for which he/she was created. It is clear that there can be no true education which is not wholly directed to the human person’s last end, and that in the present order of providence, since God has revealed Himself to us in the Person of His Only Begotten Son, who alone is ‘the Way, the Truth and the Life’, there can be no ideally perfect education (for Christians) which is not Christian Education.” This therefore suggests that holistic formation and adequate information is crucial to preparing young people to participate zealously and courageously in the ministry of spreading the good news.

Ministry

Talking about ministry, our attention is immediately drawn to the priesthood and consecrated life; rightly so, because these states of life are specifically and uniquely offered to and assumed by persons called to share in the church’s mission of evangelization by proclaiming the Gospel. Other states of life such as marriage and single life, even professional life also offer opportunities for evangelization and preparation for ministry. Ministry means service and it defines mission. We have established from the foregoing that Christian ministry of evangelization has no age definitions. From speechless infants to exuberant youth, witnessing to Christ can be achieved. In the Scriptures, Daniel is presented to us as an example of a young person who was nurtured in the ways of God and lived it out with great conviction and courage. Young people do not hide what they know; they always want to showcase their knowledge and potentials. In the same vein, the gospel is to be spread like the fire that Christ has come to cast on the earth and wish it were blazing already. We can trust the firebrand enthusiasm of young people to help with the spread the gospel. The ministry of evangelization is fruitful and successful when convictions are built with the help of role models who themselves live with conviction the gospel values they profess.

¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, revised edition, Paulines/St. Pauls

Children, as we know, are very impressionable, so great caution should be applied when we present values and discipline to them during their formative years. This is particularly very important, because innocent and trustful as they are, children look up to us as persons they want to emulate; they trust the strength of our moral judgement to support them in accomplishing their beautiful life's ambitions so they deserve to be presented with what is virtuous and true. The family and the larger society owe it a duty to influence young people positively while preparing them for their mission on earth, this is because they have the right to be exposed to the truth and taught to live it with courage (cfr. *Mt. 10: 7-8*). It is the responsibility of the family and the larger society to model an authentic way of life for young people this will help to achieve positive influencing. We shall now explore how the family and society influence the readiness of young people for ministry.

A. Family influence

God wants us all to be the leaven in the dough of society; in the same way, he wants us to do this when we are properly prepared. The job of parents and teachers in this exercise is to prepare their children to be ready for the service to which God will call them. Here then, the need for furnishing the children with authentic truth must of necessity be fully implemented, so that they may speak "in season and out of season" of the faith they have imbibed. To do this properly, children need to be given both the information and the intellectual formation which will enable them to answer the assaults on their religious practices and understanding that will inevitably occur. Their ability to tackle such assaults will strengthen their convictions, and make it possible for them to evangelize the world when the time for that comes.² The family plays this role in several ways that we shall now examine.

Family as First school of evangelization

The family must educate the children for life in such a way that each one may fully perform his or her role according to the vocation received by God.³ Christian families offer a special contribution to the missionary cause of the Church by fostering missionary vocations among their sons and daughters and more generally, by training their children from childhood to recognize God's love for all people.⁴ We must believe that children understand when we speak to them, all we need to do is to trust that they are listening to us when we speak to them about the need for their participation in talking about their Christian faith by teaching and sharing it with others especially among their

²Pope Pius XI, *Encyclical on the Christian Education of Youth*

³Pope John Paul II, *The Family in the Modern World*, Encyclical Letter (*Familiaris Consortio*); Paulines Publications Africa.

⁴*Ibid.*, pg. 67

peers, by so doing we build their sense of responsibility and confidence and help them to joyfully take up the challenge to evangelize.

Family as Teacher of Values

When parents live with conviction the good values they teach their children, young persons imbibe these values, making it their very personal life forming principles to such a point that they now become staunch witnesses themselves. Convinced of what they now know to be good values, they take it with them wherever they go. Though they may feel embarrassed and disappointed, they are not deterred by the bad example of people from whom they expect the 'golden' behaviour. Within the family, there are two major key players as far as the family influence is concerned; they are parents and siblings. It is important to acknowledge also that grand-parents play very important roles in directing the child's developmental inclinations towards the good, the true and the beautiful; and also, may be stronger influence in supporting and nurturing vocation to the priesthood and consecrated life, especially since children generally adore their grand-parents particularly grand-mothers. Grannies have the tested and trusted experience that help them appreciate the potentials of their grand-children and they actually have a keen understanding of their interesting questions, genuine confusions and beautiful aspirations, they enter into dialogue much more readily with their grand-children than do parents with their children. Many of us owe our generous response to embrace our vocation to the influence of our grand-parents who made us develop a strong sense of commitment toward God and towards the things of God. Our grand-parents taught us piety and the fear of the Lord with great ease, good rapport and utmost gentility. We seem to have an 'automatic' level playing ground where even parental discipline coming from them is heartily welcomed. Having said this, let us take a closer look at the relationship and influence of parents and siblings on the missionary vocation of young persons.

Parent's Factor

Parents provide the home, which is the basic nursery for the child, and they are expected to give nurturance to a child's potential and direct it along the path of personal growth, such directives will not only develop the child, but also contribute to the overall good of society. Expectations are to be matched with what efforts are made to build the child's personality and character. Parents should be exemplary. They must lead the child out from ignorance to the Truth, providing them with education that not only acquires knowledge, but one which helps them cultivate virtue and opens their mind to the reception of truth. When this is done, the young person is able to establish personal guiding principles for himself. "The parent's ministry of evangelization and catechesis ought to play a part in their children's lives

during adolescence and youth, when children as often happens, challenge or even reject the Christian faith received in earlier years”⁵

The truth taught to the child begins and is completed by introducing the child to God right from infancy. Inculcating religious values in a child sets the pace for training and discipline in the right direction. Parents must themselves be first and foremost those who uphold Christian values by their very lives, because their lives well lived, is the truth the child needs to know to help him build his own convictions and guiding principles, and from the home, the child is ready to be launched into the larger society. That is why “Parents should initiate their children at an early age into the mysteries of the faith of which they are the ‘first heralds’ for their children. They should associate them from their tenderest years with the life of the Church. A wholesome family life can foster interior dispositions that are a genuine preparation for a living faith and remain a support for it throughout one’s life.”⁶ “Parents should welcome and respect with joy and thanksgiving the Lord’s call to one of their children to follow him in virginity for the sake of the Kingdom in the consecrated life or in priestly ministry.”⁷

Parents have the duty to raise their children with keen appreciation and attention to each child’s unique nature and temperament and this goes a long way to affect how the children in the family relate to and influence each other, we realise also that siblings’ influence on each other is as important as the relationship between parents and children so we take a look at siblings’ influence on each other with particular reference to how each child develops a mature and healthy social relationship that is required for a fruitful endeavour in evangelization.

Sibling’s Factor

The first experience of community for a young person is the family. Apart from our parents, we have our brothers and sisters together with whom we are raised. Our siblings have particular influence on each one of us, because more often than not, we spend more time with our siblings during our formative childhood years than with our parents. “Connections with our siblings may be the only intimate connections that last. Sibling relationships continue for better or for worse. Your brother will always be your brother and your sister will always be your sister.”⁸

⁵*Ibid.*, pg. 66

⁶*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, revised edition, Paulines/St. Pauls

⁷*Ibid.*, #2233

⁸H. Norman Wright; *Sisters and Brothers forever; Bond or Bondage*

In an ideal setting where siblings grow up together and must necessarily acquire and practice certain virtues if they are properly guided and supported, relating with his siblings and peers, a child develops his ability to live his life with consideration for others. “Siblings can add so much to life. For instance, they teach one another important social skills. If the family unit is healthy, brothers and sisters create opportunities to learn to get along with others. Siblings learn how to use power, to give and take, to communicate and to get along with someone different from themselves. They learn just how far they can go in dealing with someone and what they can get away with. All of this is preparation for adult life.”⁹

When properly guided and mentored, siblings are able to learn and acquire virtues such as forgiveness, compassion, honesty, respect and piety and are able to uphold these as values. This learned behaviour is a positive contributory factor to launching young persons into ministry whatever state of life they choose or are called to and this further enriches the general society into which these young persons bring their potentials harnessed from their home of nurture.

The society in turn has the capacity to influence young persons, it either helps them sustain already learned behaviour or deviate from it, and thus it is expedient that societal influence is given consideration.

B. Societal Influence

The family, being the first setting where the child learns social interaction, prepares the child to be launched into the larger society as its integral member and an essential contributor to its growth. It is in this connection that the society plays the role of both teacher and beneficiary of good formation of young minds and character, because it is these that in turn builds and develops society. Order and discipline in society is not achieved in isolation of proper formation of the character of young people. The peace a society enjoys is the fruit of society’s investment in its citizens’ moral, social and spiritual welfare, particularly the training and welfare investment in its young population. For instance, in our Nigerian society, the training of a child used to be considered the duty of the community; each person’s child is everyone’s child. This duty used to be discharged with a great sense of commitment and responsibility, but this is seen to be disappearing from our so-called modern culture; to the extent that correcting another person’s child has become a thing considered unwarranted interference, yet we all in some way or the other must pay the price for unruly youth behaviour. Nonetheless, if the society expects good and holy men and women to minister to them as consecrated persons and clergy, the society must understand that it is its primary duty to train young people

⁹*Ibid.*, pg. 23

well. What is required are the first basic lessons in obedience, chastity, generosity, sacrifice and a life of prayer, because every young person is an ambassador of his family and the society he comes from.

The church has always been at the forefront of reminding and educating parents about their role in the proper upbringing of their children, she has never relented in this effort because she recognizes her role in building citizens for heaven and it starts with grooming young people for ministry.

Role of the Church-as-Family of God (Ecclesial Community) in grooming young people for ministry

The church cannot afford to be unconcerned about what happens in society or where society is headed with its self-destructive philosophies. She is an integral part of society as much as the spiritual forms an important aspect of the holistic nature of the human person. It behoves the church community therefore to form and also enhance the ongoing formation of the whole human person, directing his growth towards eternal life. This formation starts from even before a child is born. The adult persons coming together as man and wife to form a family is prepared by the church to see themselves as collaborators with God in his divine act of creation. The church anticipates the birth of a child as much as does the expectant parents. When the child is born, he is received by both parents and church community as not only God's gift to the family and the church, but as a new member with innate potentials, rights and subsequently, duties towards the biological, social and ecclesial community. It is for this same reason that the church baptizes infants trusting that parents will help them grow in the faith into which they have been baptized and when they grow up, will themselves hand on the faith with a sense of responsibility and commitment towards the advancement of God's Kingdom.

Necessity for ongoing formation of young persons

Ongoing formation of the individual is a participation in the recreation of the individual and renewal of society, the church achieves this through catechesis and the exemplary life of its clergy and consecrated persons whom the people look up to as role models. They are particularly referenced to young people as persons who should be admired and imitated. Priests and consecrated persons are inserted into the society as leaven so that by their word and example they may present the gospel and its values as a way of life that should be followed. Young persons these days want to be taught a way of life that is authentic and true, and they want to live this life radically. They do not want mediocrity, they do not want their potential for growth to be limited, and neither are they hoping to meet with disappointments. They simply want to go all the way to living fully the life presented to them as the way to live. Young people dare to

believe that they can ‘do all things.’ They see themselves as the revolution the world needs, so that things will be as they ought to be. Needless to say, that the world is facing moral and spiritual poverty of severe magnitude; this is in addition to the material poverty that is globally prevalent. Our Nigerian society has its own share of this poverty and we seem to be giving up on the young as our ‘bright future.’ Come to think of it! How much attention and character formation have we given to the young members of our society? It appears they are left to determine for themselves what way of life is the best.

Now, concerning the high rate of crime and kidnapping in our society; who is to blame? Material poverty seems to be the main reason proffered. While we can argue that material poverty has a role to play, we cannot deny the fact that moral decadence and spiritual poverty are major factors engendering the high rate of crime among young persons in our society today. If the government of our nation decide to neglect their duty to provide an enabling environment for the holistic formation and growth of young persons; the Nigerian Church cannot afford to shy away from its responsibility of grooming young people for ministry. The poor must see in us a sign of hope. We ought to do everything we can to alleviate the poverty of the people. While it is the duty of government to provide food, shelter and other basic social amenities for its citizens, we cannot afford to fail in our own responsibility to enrich young persons in other important areas of their lives – sound spiritual and moral character. This is why we think that material poverty is not sufficient to turn a person into a notorious criminal, but spiritual and moral poverty can, even in the midst of material wealth.

When the fear of the Lord ceases to exist or to rule the lives of people, we can expect the worse. Young Persons suffer these, largely because the adult community and all who should know have swept the fear of God under the carpet. Those of us who should be living and modelling a life of simplicity now live ostentatious lives and the poor live beside us and are watching! Before their very eyes, we use what we do not really need and we waste what others could benefit from; ‘deprived’ of their rights, the poor get angry and plan ‘vengeance’ and when they begin to unleash this, we all suffer – good and bad alike. Young persons are more vulnerable to becoming a dangerous threat to the security of society because they are the ones that feel neglected with respect to social security. It is necessary that every civil policy drawn should always take into consideration Youth development and empowerment; this will ensure that they always have a fertile ground to release their innate potentials.

Launching young people into ministry

Young people are the best for evangelizing themselves, but they have to be properly groomed and their potentials nurtured for ministry. Working with young people has armed me with great faith and hope in their potential as ambassadors for Christ. Young people are not essentially ‘rebels,’ they have potential energies ready to erupt! Properly channelled, their energies become a ready tool for effective evangelization.

Let us quickly examine the various developmental stages of a young person considering its importance in grooming young people for ministry.

Infants: Young people are prepared right from infancy for the ministry that is the fruit of their Christian vocation. Infancy is the stage in the life of the young person when he learns the basic rudiments of the faith from his parents and family environment. The child learns to see God as a loving and provident Father in heaven to whom the child learns to turn his heart. The child learns to say short simple prayers as dialogue with this hidden God whose word he will soon begin to hear. It is a work of prime importance. It demands great love and profound respect for the child who has a right to a simple and true presentation of the Christian faith.¹⁰

Children: the school-age young person begins to be taught the Christian life in such a way as to prepare him to become inserted into the life of the Church. The child is prepared for the celebration of the sacraments through catechesis which communicates to the child the joy of being a witness to Christ in ordinary life.¹¹ At this stage, when properly mentored, the child learns to speak the truth. He learns not to lie and to avoid other vices commonly found among children and they influence their peer to toe the same path.

Adolescents: it is the time of discovering oneself and one’s own inner world, the time of generous plans, the time when the feelings of love awaken with the biological impulses of sexuality, the time of desire to be together, the time of a particular intense joy connected with the exhilarating discovery of life.¹²

Required at this stage is a catechesis capable of leading the adolescent to re-examine his life and to engage in dialogue, a catechesis that presents Christ as a Friend, Guide and Model, capable of being admired and imitated.¹³

¹⁰Pope John II, *Catechesis Today*, Apostolic Exhortation (Catechesis Tradendae); Paulines Publications Africa

¹¹*Ibid.*, pg. 34

¹²*Ibid.*, pg. 35

¹³*Ibid.*, pg. 35

The Young: this is the moment of great decisions. Although the young may enjoy the support of the members of their family and their friends, they have to rely on themselves and their own conscience and must ever more frequently and decisively assume responsibility for their destiny.¹⁴

Catechesis then takes on considerable importance, since it is the time when the Gospel can be presented, understood and accepted as capable of giving meaning to life and thus of inspiring attitudes that would have no other explanations, such as self-sacrifice, detachment, forbearance, justice, commitment, reconciliation, a sense of the Absolute and the unseen. All these are traits that distinguish a young person from his or her companions as a disciple of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

Catechesis thus prepares the young person for the important Christian commitments of adult life. For example, it is certain that many vocations to the priesthood and religious life have their origin during a well-impacted catechesis in infancy and adolescent. From infancy until the threshold of maturity, catechesis is thus permanent school of the faith and follows the major stages of life, like a beacon lighting the path of the child, the adolescent and the young person.¹⁶

Challenges

The society in which we live, to a large extent often neglects its duty to train and empower young people and this constitutes one of the several challenges to grooming young people for ministry as outlined below:

1. Some parents are not good character formators, either because they were not well formed themselves or they never internalized good formation.
2. There are too many distractions these days that parents need to work extremely hard to make sure their children are not lost in the midst of these distractions
3. These young ones are confronted by multifaceted challenges especially challenges to their faith as Catholics
4. Growing moral decadence in the society, wrong use of the internet and social media, all pose very important challenge to good character formation
5. Education these days, stress academic excellence at the expense of spiritual and good moral formation

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pg. 36

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pg. 36

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pg. 36

6. Too much reliance by parents on school and catechism classes for the training of their children
7. A good number of Parents spend so much time running around to be able to fend for their families, hence the inadequate/low quality time spent with children at home leading to increased number of miscreants among the young population.

Coping with the challenges

We cannot give up; there will always be more ways than one to solving a problem. The prevailing challenges must be faced with courage and the determination to win the battle against juvenile moral decadence, as such, all hands must be on deck to help children and young people build up their own personal principles and groom them for ministry. In scripture, God tells us that we should train up a child in the way he will go, and when he is old he will not depart from it. We must see the overwhelming importance of our role as educators of our children, both in terms of their intellectual and their moral formation, and give ourselves wholeheartedly to this task. This will not provide us with a life of easy luxury, but it will provide us with a life work deserving of the expenditure of all our gifts.

1. We must give them good conscience formation since they are in a society that is fast losing sensitivity of conscience
2. They want to hear something said to them – something practical and practicable
3. There is need to engage them frequently in maturity drilling conversations, this will help them nurture a morally sound, spiritually edifying and intellectually sound argument and judgement.
4. We need to make sure they are not just regurgitating what they hear on TV, Films, and Radio etc.
5. They should be taught to consider prayer time as sacred and precious
6. We should help them to learn how to say and value private prayers and devotions. They should be encouraged to have their own private altars for their personal and private prayers.
7. Difficult children could be God's way of telling us that we are not perfect, so we ought to be highly dependent on him. It trains us in acquiring the virtue of patience, while we keep teaching and training until God allows our efforts to yield fruit.

Conclusion

The work of handing on the faith to children, in the sense of facilitating its expression and growth, helps the whole family in its evangelization mission. They naturally begin to spread the faith to all around them, even outside of the family circle. Children who grew up in missionary families often become

missionaries themselves; growing up in warm and friendly families, they learn to relate to the world in this way, without giving up their faith or their convictions.¹⁷

The greatest legacy the older generation can leave to the younger generation, is the good example of their lives, only then that they can have the courage to say ‘we are handing over heritage to younger ones’, because they trust the generation they have formed in good life just as Christ taught his disciples by the example of his life, and was not afraid to commission them to continue his work on earth. “The family is thus an agent of pastoral activity through its explicit proclamation of the Gospel and its legacy of varied forms of witness, namely solidarity with the poor, openness to a diversity of people, the protection of creation, moral and material solidarity with other families, including those most in need, commitment to the promotion of the common good and the transformation of unjust social structures, beginning in the territory in which the family lives, through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.”¹⁸ Young people will always honour noble heritage; and as we have seen, there is need to always furnish children’s minds and hearts with *the true, the good and the beautiful*, therefore every effort at every level that is put into grooming young people for ministry is a worthwhile enterprise because family, church and society are the better for it to the glory of God.

Cecilia OMEIFE, EHJ

Jos University Teaching Hospital
Plateau State

¹⁷Pope Francis, *The Joy of Love*, Apostolic Exhortation, (*Amoris Laetitia*); Paulines Publications Africa

¹⁸*Ibid.*, # 290