

TOM CALUORI

Pacing the apostolic path

Confirmation should not be a last gasp of faith but part of the ongoing journey of formation

Young Catholics do not become apostles purely by chance. If our vision for our young people is that they reach that place on their journey of faith with a sense of ownership, belonging and mission then our vision must be grounded in planning, good organisation, effective formation, prayer and yet more prayer to become a reality.

Confirmation catechesis is the one place where parish youth ministry happens; but too often we have a fingers-crossed approach – with a small group of catechists doing the best they can. The young people have usually been encouraged by their parents, who feel that this is one last thing they can do to form their children in their faith. Once the young people are confirmed, however, many of us stand back, hold our breath and hope for the best; and so many of our young people then disappear from our churches.

I wonder if we need a complete change of mindset – a fundamental shift in our whole approach to confirmation preparation. Perhaps, instead of seeing it as a one-off opportunity to catechise our young people, we might instead see it as part of a process of forming them into apostles – an opportunity to help our young people to see that they are needed, an opportunity to invite them to get involved in the various ministries in the parish.

A few years ago, a group of us decided that something had to be done. We met to talk about what was happening to our young people and decided to organise service projects for the confirmation candidates. A meeting was called for all those in the parish involved in ministries – children's liturgy, first-Eucharist programme, SVP, music ministry and so on. All of them agreed to work alongside the Con- firmandi in the various ministries in the parish.

Then, a meeting was called for all the Con- firmandi, their parents, the catechists and people leading parish ministries to present the choices open to the young people. It was not a question of "whether" but "which" ministry they would join. There was a real feeling of belonging to a family as we gathered around these young people and welcomed them into active service and ministry within the parish. The service projects started and continued throughout the term prior to the beginning of the confirmation programme and then continued throughout the programme.

There is a move towards youth ministry

teams in parishes. Confirmation preparation can be orientated towards young people being welcomed and integrated into parish life. Before the end of our confirmation programme, the young people were asked if they would like to meet together to plan a disco to celebrate their confirmation; and many of them met and planned the event for the whole group.

The group was also asked if they would like to form a post-confirmation group. We suggested Impact, a part of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) movement for those under 16. (Of course, the invitation could also have been to Youth SVP, Youth 2000 or the Focolare Gen group for young people, to mention a few other options.) Impact offers ongoing formation for young people employing what is known as the "See, Judge, Act, Review" process. This involves encouraging them to share problems and focus on a chosen issue. The rights and wrongs of the chosen issue are then discussed and a decision taken on action to change the situation. Once the action has been completed the young people are encouraged to re- view it at a later date.

The process is "bottom up" or "inductive"; it starts from the ordinary, everyday life experiences of the young people – the place where they live out their Christian mission as newly confirmed Catholics, rather than the "top down" or "deductive" approach, which takes as its starting point teaching input. Both have their place. Self-discovery is key to the inductive approach; it leads to the kind of ownership and sense of belonging which is essential for the fully mature, fully alive young Christian.

Our particular group met each week for over two years. Its meetings were facilitated by adult companions, as they are called in the Impact movement. There were three of us – all of us members of our parish youth ministry team. The numbers of young people fluctuated and, over the two years, some young people left the group and others joined. The young people elected their own committee and decided on the issues that they would enquire into – ranging from street crime to fashion and from

family life to relationships. The emphasis was on looking at their lives in the light of the Good News and it was followed always by the question, "What can we do about it?" There were many lively discussions and the group managed to get "in the loop" with regard to the parish, deanery and wider Church. The young people led specially prepared Stations of the Cross during Lent, they played a leading part in deanery youth Masses and took part in the Make Poverty History publicity event organised by Cafod outside Westminster Cathedral last year. This included a photo opportunity with the BBC Radio 2 DJ Dermot O'Leary, with the picture subsequently appearing on Cafod leaflets all over the country. The group was also invited to help to pilot the agency's youth website. Some of the group enquired into sweatshops in developing countries and the connection with teenage fashion and, in March, a member of the group, now in Year 13 at school, came along to the AGM of the Croydon Deanery Youth Project and addressed the meeting.

This required a lot of hard work and commitment on the part of the youth ministry team. There are no quick fixes in terms of methods and approaches, but a young person can be touched deeply by the presence of the Spirit as they work in the fertile ground of tried and tested movements such as Impact – where love, respect and prayerful reflection are the elements of the process.

Our newly formed parish youth ministry team, working on behalf of the parish community, learned a lot. We learned about the need for an overview, the need for fore-

thought for good organisation and the need for training for those working alongside our young people and we learned about the need for adequate resources. We also learned that we cannot settle for less when it comes to our young people. In the words of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn, founder of the YCW, "Each young person is worth all the gold in the world."

■ Tom Caluori became Croydon Deanery Youth Ministry Coordinator after finishing an MA in pastoral studies at Heythrop in 2003.

TO DO

Set up a parish youth ministry team

Include service projects in confirmation preparation programmes

Plan post-confirmation formation for your young people using initiatives such as Impact