

Recommended Guidelines for Adolescent Retreats

“The practice of providing intensive faith-growing experiences for adolescents through retreats, in evening-, daylong-, overnight-, and multiday-formats, obviously, has been one of the most vital, most frequently utilized elements in the entire revitalized youth outreach and pastoral care process begun, in recent decades, in U. S. parishes and in Catholic Schools.”¹ Youth ministries here in the Diocese have also long made use of retreats to evangelize and catechize young people. Because retreats are such an important process in the faith-growth of adolescents, it is vital that they are based on sound principles.

These guidelines are offered, not to pre-determine the style and content of any adolescent retreat program, but to present principles to keep in mind when planning and implementing any parish retreat experience. These principles apply to parish based retreats as well as to retreats facilitated by parish or other retreat teams anywhere in the Diocese.

While young people are in our care, we have a great responsibility for their safety and well-being. Retreats present occasions during which the diocese, parish and individuals can be found to be liable in any of the categories mentioned in the previous chapter.²

A. Theological Principles Guiding Retreats

Youth retreats should be designed to foster a personal relationship with Jesus that leads to discipleship within the community of the church.

Retreats are a type of experience through which the church exercises her pastoral ministry to youth by proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, by fostering the formation of Christian community, by providing opportunities for participants to reflect upon questions of faith and life experience in the light of the Gospel, and by challenging retreatants to a personal response of service.

The doctrinal content of youth retreats should be theologically consistent with the official teaching of the Catholic Church. Use of Scripture should be from Catholic Biblical translations, with other translations and paraphrases of Scripture supplementing, but not replacing, such translations.

Prayer, in its liturgical, communal, and personal forms, is an essential aspect of the retreat experience opening participants to ongoing conversion and deepening of faith.

Retreats for youth should provide life-giving liturgical celebrations which are based on principles of good liturgy, are appropriate for the occasion, and are celebrated with sufficient

¹ Reynolds R. Ekstrom, *Access Guides to Youth Ministry: Retreats*, ed., (New Rochelle: Don Bosco Multimedia, 1991), p. 17.

² The following sets of principles are drawn from and based on previous work and an article done by Cheryl Thockle and the Diocese of Sacramento and can be found in *Retreats*, pp. 115-117.

time to allow full preparation and participation by the assembly.

B. Psychological Principles Guiding Retreats

Retreats should provide the opportunity for participants to integrate their experience and thereby deepen their sense of belonging and meaning.

Retreat environments and experiences must be characterized by acceptance, growth, and freedom. It is never appropriate to manipulate either an experience or the environment in order to obtain a specific response. Emotional manipulation is also inappropriate and youth must be assured that whatever emotions they experience at any given time during a retreat are valid and have no moral overtones or consequences.

Retreatants should be given diverse opportunities through which they may express themselves and feel safe in doing so.

The psychological well-being of participants is safeguarded by maintaining a good balance of recreation, reflection, structured activity, rest and diet.

Retreats for adolescents especially lend themselves to peer ministry. Not only does such an approach encourage the sharing of the Christian experience, but it also further encourages youth to exercise their baptismal call to witness to Christ with us.

Retreat experiences are only one aspect of a continuing evangelization, catechesis, and discipleship: Therefore, they are most, and perhaps only, effective within the context of a total process of youth ministry.

C. Catechetical Principles Guiding Youth Retreats

Human experience is the starting point for youth catechesis, joining the personal story of youth to the Christ story.

The content and design of youth retreats should be age appropriate and should be varied; i.e., the same type of retreat should not be repeated with the same group over and over.

Retreats with catechetical themes are as important as those with evangelization themes. The retreat should fit within the context of the kerygma: evangelization, conversion, catechize, and mystagogy.

Discussion, group processes, small group sharing, and activities involving all youth participants should use the group dynamics appropriate for the activity, group, content, and goals of the retreat and should be led by those familiar with these dynamics.

Storytelling, faith sharing, and personal witnessing, as well as time for private reflection and journaling should be respected as valuable elements in communicating the Gospel message.

The dynamic process of discipleship is drawn from the work of Sherry Weddell (3), Jim Beckman and Eric Gallagher (4) This process should be considered in planning retreat sessions, topics, etc.

- The Process of Evangelization
 - **Initial Evangelization**
 - Pre-Evangelization (Trust/Curiosity)
 - Openness (Openness)
 - Initial Proclamation (Seeking)
 - Initial Conversion (Disciple)
 - **Discipleship**
 - Initiatory Catechesis
 - Adherence
 - Ongoing Formation
 - Missionary Initiative

D. Developmental Principles Guiding Youth Retreats

Early Adolescence (ages between 10/11 - 14/15)

When planning retreat activities for younger adolescents, keep the following in mind:

- Physical Activity: Time to stretch, wiggle, exercise, relax; non-competitive games and activities.
- Competence and Achievement: Provide opportunities where they can succeed and be affirmed.
- Self-Definition: Provide time to absorb new ways of thinking and doing; provide time with friendship groupings.
- Creative Expression: Provide opportunities to express creatively new feelings, interests, abilities, thoughts; expose to drama, role playing, etc.
- Positive Social Interactions with Peers and Adults: Provide time with peers that allows for support, companionship, and challenge; retreat team members must be willing to share their own stories, experiences, views, values and feelings.
- Structure and Clear Limits: Provide explicit boundaries, rules and limits, allowing participants some input in setting them.
- Meaningful Participation: Successful events are planned with, not for, young adolescents;

3 Sherry Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples*

4 Jim Beckman & Eric Gallagher, *Discipleship Focused Youth Ministry*

provide opportunities wherein they may develop a sense of responsibility.

Middle and Late Adolescence (14/15-18/19)

When planning retreat programs, sessions, experiences for older adolescents keep in mind the following conditions necessary for healthy Christian faith growth in this age group.⁵ Provide opportunities to:

- participate as full members of the faith community and society, experiencing a sense of belonging and mission.
- gain knowledge and experience in making moral decisions based on the Gospel and Tradition.
- form and experience positive relationships with peers and develop friendship-making and -maintaining skills.
- explore who they are and who they can become.
- develop a social consciousness that is grounded in Scripture and the teachings of the Church by exploring, discussing, and acting on global and social justice and peace issues.
- understand their human dignity in sexual growth and develop healthy Christian values and attitude regarding their own sexuality.
- develop personal prayer lives by experiencing a variety of prayer forms and styles.
- develop relationships with adult Catholic Christians who will share their own faith journeys and who will ask questions that encourage critical thinking and reflection.

⁵ Roberto, John. *Network Paper No. 26: Principles for Ministry With Youth*. Don Bosco Multimedia: New Rochelle, N.Y. 1989, pp. 4-5.

Recommended Retreat Components⁶

Physical

- Adequate sleep
- Adequate recreation time
- Balanced diet
- Access to outdoors and nature, if possible

Spiritual

- Eucharistic Liturgy (priority on a multiday retreat)
- Reconciliation Service
 - if in keeping with retreat design
 - seek permission ahead of time for general absolution if there will not be enough ordained clergy available
 - consider presenting some catechesis on the sacrament over the retreat period
- Communal and Private Prayer and Reflection
 - provide mentoring in these types of prayer
- Praying with Scripture

Psychological/Social/Catechetical

- Balance of private time and group time
- Opportunity for pastoral care and guidance
- Reflection on human, personal, communal experience
- Community building
- Opportunities for participation and involvement
- Creative activity and expression
- Input and presentations and follow ups

⁶ Based on *Retreats*, p. 118.

- Discussion and sharing opportunities

Supportive Components

- Adequate and early program planning and design
- Adequate and early team preparation
- Orientation or preparation for parents/guardians and participants before the retreat
- Follow-up process (immediate and short-term — there is no need for endless follow up of an experience)
- Evaluation by team and participants

E. Concluding Comments

Besides being excellent evangelization and catechetical approaches, retreats are an integral component of any faith-formation ministry which, by definition, seeks the conversion of others. The main task in facilitating a retreat is to create the *ambiente*, the *milieu*, the environment where young people can experience the grace of conversion.

Conversion is experienced as a relationship with Jesus Christ and “is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful:”⁷ That is, it is not a private experience, but is uniquely communal and sacramental. It is a spiritual journey that is lifelong and has a beginning, a middle, and an end:⁸ It does not end with confirmation, for example.

One should not harbor the expectation of a ‘spiritual high’ indefinitely. Prolongation of such a state would more likely be the result of pathology than healthy growth. Evangelization strategies aimed at artificially sustaining only one dimension of the conversion journey miss seasons of growth that are equally important.⁹

If retreat efforts center around collaboration with the Holy Spirit in the work of conversion, then the fruit of those efforts will be visible in the life of the youth who experience the retreat.

⁷ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults: Study Edition*. 1988, ¶4.

⁸ *Ibid*, ¶5.

⁹ *Retreats*, Duggan, Robert. “Conversion: The Underlying Dynamic,” p. 90.