

SOME THOUGHTS ON BEGINNING A YOUTH GROUP

To begin with, kids will not sign up for something just on the merits of "it is good for you". They need something that will give them experience. That is the key word.

All through their schooling, everything is an experience, the sports program, the math classes, the science trips, everything--except religion. That is purely intellectual, all theory. They never get to put into practice what they know.

Here, I believe the Third Order of St. Francis can offer something. How do you get them in? There is no ready answer. Be sure not to approach it from the level of theory. Do not promise fun, games and pizza. There has to be something experiential, something that touches them inside, gives them the impetus to grow.

From my own experience this comes best from a Junior Third Order Convention. It can be done with a good retreat, the modern kind with discussion, talks, prayer, Mass, periods of silence and times for talking, there must be variety. The TEC program has this, and so does SEARCH.) The old fashioned retreat with long talks, silence, long talks and silence may be fine later on, but now it must be variety, well done with a goal in mind.

Once they have been through this "experience" they will want to continue on with it. There must be time for reflection, in a group, of what happened, or what God has done to them. Then build up the whole scene for them. You came, you listened, you discussed, you grew, others helped you. God was close, you let Him in, He came to you. How does it feel? How would you like this to continue? Then one can gather them together once or twice a month--on the same level. If you want to compete with the 4H Club or the local pizza parlor you will lose. This is what they have their fill of and it is boring.

We have fraternity, closeness, we do things together, we plan things, we care about one another, and perhaps most important, we grow, sense it, and find support from the growth of others.

We have found that if we have a home Mass, a simple one, with the songs learned on convention or retreat, with a personal, practical explanation of the Gospel, with time for discussion by the kids on their level, at their speed, stupid as it may appear to us, they grow and feel growth. Don't preach at them. Let them sit on the floor all during Mass, that is their normal position anyway. Share with them, let them talk during the homily very freely, control the trend, however, don't wander all over the place. Perhaps ask one or two more vocal persons to start the discussion with a vague question. Let them carry the ball. Sum up their thoughts, at the end, mentioning the love of God, correct any errors they have made, just mention that the Lord holds to this, don't single out the kids or make a scene. Be quiet, warm, strong, and a leader.

Make a good prayer of the faithful. Let the kids add their own, some may mention a sick parent, they don't like to push themselves, but enter into their lives. Let them talk to God. They like time, take time. Let them enter into your life and prayer. That's what the THIRD ORDER was in the beginning anyhow.

During the Mass at Communion time, pause, let the kids feel comfortable talking to our Lord. Many of them find this new and wonderful. The Mass is ended with a final song of friendship, of love of God or of fellowman.

After the Mass the officers take over for a short meeting. Plans for the next Mass, deciding a prayer session held two weeks from now, committees to choose songs, readings, volunteering a home for the next meeting are things they decide and the kids do it all. Take no part in it, it is theirs. If they want something let them ask you just as if you were one of the kids.

It is best for the director to hold some meeting with the officers prior to the Mass, perhaps a week before. Go through the meeting, mention the phone call committee's job of calling all the members. We send out a letter and make it homey, it all helps, and it pleases the parents. The meeting ends with a spontaneous prayer by one of the kids.

Then a short, short social period. Cold Kool-aid and chips are the easiest. They enjoy each other in conversation on their interest level. After about ten minutes the kids are gone for home or some local gathering place, but you have touched them long enough. Let it settle down and be ready for the next meeting.

To sum it up. Give them an experience, a good religious one, let some expert do it. Don't preach law and order. Be firm, use the tools of God, prayer, Mass, Gospel, kindness, concern and friendship to do the whole thing.

It takes time. But once the first experience has triggered them off, they sell it to others. You cannot sell it to others. Why? I don't know. Maybe we just don't have it, or they don't listen to us older goodies.

It appears to me that the Convention, the tremendous growth and religious experience that they receive at the convention holds the group together more than anything else. True we do give them a good course in Franciscan Spirituality, and tidbits about St. Francis, but it is the solid religious experience that really captures their minds.

Our kids will save every penny they earn all year long just to go on convention. They meet other great kids, pray together, learn and grow like little weeds. They come home, confound their parents and live off this until the next year.

We have another retreat during the school year. They sign up for that two months ahead of time. God has become part of their life, and prayer down through their days must be nurtured by the retreats. They glow so much that even their parents comment what the Third Order has meant to them.

Plan ahead, keep the calendar moving, have goals, simple ones. Shortly after the Convention we have FAMILY NIGHT. The kids go ape over it. It consists of three parts.

First the Mass, the kids prepare it, songs, readings, everything. Who comes? Mom and Dad and all the brothers and sisters. During the homily congratulate all of them, parents, too.

Then comes the dinner. The kids buy the chicken, and make all the rest. Cafeteria or family style. They charge each family something like \$2.98. Each Third Order kid pays for his family if he can. It is his treat. All the kids serve, do the dishes and let Mom, Dad and the kids run around enjoying each other. The parents enjoy it also.

Then comes part three. Slides from the last convention, from retreat and their work are shown. Best is to have a running commentary over the P.A. as this tells who is who and the kids really have fun making fun of one another. This is fraternity and the folks catch it quickly. Then perhaps a song or something that they learned on convention or retreat. You see, at home they seldom share much, here it all comes out, there is support, no shame of their love of God, and it really warms the cockles of Mom and Dad's heart. It usually ends with a great thank you to all.

Some service to the community and the parish may be fostered. Being a server or a lector at Mass, singing for a Mass at the hospital, visiting the sick, or things like that, something small, something for the group, let them run it, if they fail, they know it. Look for the real leaders, let them carry the ball, but give them support, like the meeting before the Mass. Pat them on the back, they are good but usually short on leading a group, give them the strength and the experience.

Always make the kids feel that this is their doings. We did have some doughnut sales to pay our way to the convention. It helps, but making money is really no end for a Third Order Group.

To become a member of our group the candidate must attend the monthly meetings for one year or attend the Convention with about six months of monthly meeting attendance. Then there is a ceremony of first commitment. Now as novices they meet with a Sister for one year, using the blue book--"The Third Order Vocation" by Leonard Foley, OFM and Jovian Weigel, OFM. This takes place on a Sunday once a month for twelve months. If for any chance they miss a lesson, Sister takes care of it, usually by private appointment. Once they miss, without excuse or makeup, three or four lessons, the year is ended and they either drop out or start all over again. Once they drop out we remind them that they are no longer one of us and not welcome at any sessions for anything, especially convention which is a big event of the year. At the end of this period they make a final commitment during special ceremonies and receive a medal with the Third Order Symbol.

A renewal of commitment is made at the end of each year.

Marian Douglas, OFM & Sister Angeline Hagemann, OSF