

## Using Apologetics in Youth Ministry

by David Bristow

Knowing and defending are inextricably related. A real and critical defense of Catholic theology has to be rooted in a proper and reasonable understanding of the faith. With this in mind, the question of *how* has to be addressed. How can we as youth ministers, adult volunteers, retreat directors, or religious education teachers work apologetics into our time with young people? How does one specifically implement a solid “defense of the faith” into high school or junior high programs and keep teens interested?



Apologetics can often be intimidating because many youth workers do not know where to begin. Others fear they do not know enough about apologetics and are under the false impression that they have to possess an immense amount of theological or philosophical knowledge to pull it off. Yet it is not a question of how much a youth worker understands about Catholic apologetics, but rather of the willingness to find programs, speakers, or materials that do. Here are some ideas and tips that may serve as a way to include apologetics as a part of a youth ministry program.



Personally, I think one of the most enjoyable ways to teach our young people about how to defend the faith is with **Apologetic Jeopardy**. My adult volunteers and I put together a Jeopardy board complete with topics that frequently come up in real life situations. Examples included chastity, pro-life, faith vs. science, Marian devotion, purgatory, and the sacraments. Under each category, we chose five questions worth different point values. The questions did not have to be given in classic Jeopardy style—in fact, most of them were either true-or-false or multiple choice. We split the teams into male versus female and allowed the teams to work as partners to answer the questions. We then posed the questions as if they were coming from a peer at school or a neighbor on the street.

For example:

Question: “What is the deal with purgatory?”

- A) It’s a belief that arose in the Middle Ages, but is no longer professed by the Church
- B) It’s a middle state where people go to get a second chance to gain entrance into heaven
- C) It’s a place where the “not entirely good,” but “not entirely bad” people reside
- D) It’s the state after death where our sins and the effects of our sins are purged by Christ’s love before going to heaven

After each question had been answered correctly, the game host gave a brief explanation of the answer. Surprisingly, the game moved very quickly as the teens loved the competition and the prizes given for correctly-answered “daily doubles.”

I feel it is important to **bring in a speaker** (or speakers) at least twice a year to answer the teenagers’ questions regarding some aspect of their faith. For instance, we brought in a Youth Apostles priest to discuss the significance of the Eucharist in the lives of the young people. When Father David Sharland agreed to speak at the Sunday night meeting, I asked if he could also take questions regarding the Eucharist afterward. From the talk and ensuing questions, our team formed a sheet of common objections and misunderstandings about the Eucharist and how we as Catholics could respond to them. At the next Sunday meeting, we went over them briefly and even acted out a scenario with the teenagers.

Another option is to form a panel of volunteers prepared to answer and defend the faith (we called it the “**Catholic Guru Panel**”). I asked the teenagers to write down common misunderstandings or sincere questions for those who were on the panel. Any question that couldn’t be answered by the board resulted

in a reward for the teenagers and a penalty for the panel. Penalties included pelting the “Gurus” with water balloons or freshly made cream pies, a sight the teens absolutely cherished (n.b.: you may want to leave the penalty part out when recruiting volunteers for the activity). Speakers and panels such as these provide a positive and entertaining environment for apologetic work, giving young people the opportunity to sharpen their knowledge and defense of the faith.

In order to provide resources for your adult volunteers and teens, it is always a good idea to have a list of apologetic websites, social media accounts, pamphlets, and magazines available. This bibliography can serve as a way for young people and educators alike to research their faith and strengthen it against common objections. All youth ministry programs are different in their approaches to teens; however, I feel it is absolutely critical that youth leaders stress regularly the importance of cultivating a *reasonable* faith. Often our teens need reassurance about their faith from respected adult youth workers. They continuously want to hear that the Catholic faith is practical and worth living. As youth ministers, religious education teachers, retreat directors, and adult volunteers, we are not required to have all the answers. Instead, we simply need to know that there *are* answers, and how we can help teens find them. Let us emphasize Christ’s words, “seek and you shall find,” for if our teenagers hold a reasonable Catholic faith, then any future objections to it can and will be overcome.

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