

The Value of Apologetics for Teenagers

by David Bristow

In the movie “The Last Samurai,” director Edward Zwick presents the tale of an ancient line of Japanese warriors defending their traditional codes and beliefs against the encroachment of Western modernization. The story perfectly highlights the dichotomy often witnessed between the sacred values of a people and the ever-changing ideals of the culture in which they live. On many occasions, the split between what is right, just, and good on the one hand and what is considered modern, updated, and efficient on the other creates such tension that a war inevitably ignites between the two. This was especially the case with the Samurai, who had to defend what they knew to be truth against their own empire, which was set on financial gain and leading them toward moral decline.

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Like the Samurai of old, Catholics today are also faced with the task of defending their beliefs in a world that so often appears bent on bringing them down. In fact, it is our Catholic teenagers who are doing much of this defending, for the secular media and modern philosophy are incessantly persuading their peers and educators alike that Catholicism is unreasonable, impractical, and ultimately untenable.

We as Catholic youth ministers need to understand the value of apologetics and stress the reasonability of our faith. Catholic teens cannot simply slide through high school these days without facing at least a few questions about their devotion. Many people, influenced by contemporary thought stressing “God’s unknowable existence,” comment that Catholicism either needs to be updated or replaced with Eastern religion, or abolished altogether. Others complain about “obsolete moral practices” found within the Church, or question the sensibility of the sacraments. The magnitude and depth of the questions aimed at our Catholic teenagers can severely damage or even kill the intellectual component of their faith, leaving them worried, confused, and less likely to follow Church teaching. If St. Augustine is correct in saying that we *always* have a reason for our faith, then eroding the rational foundations of our Catholic faith will lead us hopelessly down the road of unbelief.

Contrary to first impressions, implementing apologetics into youth ministry does not have to be painful or boring. (Check out this [article](#) from David Bristow about using apologetics in youth ministry.) It can be as simple as answering one Catholic question a week during regularly scheduled youth meetings. The main point of doing such apologetic work is to show teens how our Catholic faith makes sense for all people regardless of their personal backgrounds. Furthermore, it reinforces the idea that Catholicism is not just some whimsical, two-dimensional, or repressive thought-system, but rather a loving, well-grounded faith that has been tested and proven over millennia. It is paramount that youth ministry teams reach the minds of our teenagers before secular or non-Catholic proselytizers do. Our goal must be to inform young people about the reasonability of the Catholic faith, and to explain to them the importance of not giving up on their beliefs simply because a professor or some other authority counsels them to do so. Strengthening the teenage mind will strengthen the teenage heart.

I *don’t* think apologetics should be considered the foundation of a youth ministry program. Rather, it should be used in order to explain the foundations of our faith (i.e., Christ, the Church, and the sacraments). Saint Peter tells us, “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (1 Pt 3:15). While instilling hope in Jesus Christ and his beautiful Church in the

young people we serve, let us teach them the value of defending it with loving respect, gentleness, and kindness. This strong knowledge will provide our teenagers with the confidence to move forward in faith and holiness, and to walk as future saints in the Catholic Church.

“I want a Laity who know their religion and who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold, and what they do not, who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it.”

–John Henry Cardinal Newman

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