

Solving Today's Crisis in Faith



By Dennis Howard

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Bishop Arthur Seratelli of Paterson recently asked a really important question: "*Why do we face the sad loss of so many of our young people from the practice of the faith?*"

He cited Pew studies showing that one-third of all adults under 30 are no longer connected with any church. He also cited polls which showed that Catholic students often know less about their faith than any other group. Indeed, four out of five abandon the practice of their faith by the time they leave high school and move on to college.

These are stunning statistics for people of faith. But what exactly has caused this crisis of faith among the young? And what can we do to change it?

High on my list of causes would be the 57 million young lives lost to abortion over the last 45 years. They represent an unprecedented 30% loss in the under-45 generation with huge implications for their social, economic and spiritual well-being.

Fully 88% of those abortions occur to young women age 15 to 35 with the highest abortion ratios among pregnant teens. A reported one out of three young women has been seduced by our culture into killing her young. Most end up having an average of two abortions each.

So why should we be surprised that this same group is suffering a huge loss of faith?

Abortion has certainly diminished young people's hopes for the future. Roe v. Wade killed off the youth market that had driven our economy since World War II. If not for abortion, today's youth market would be 43% bigger than it is today. Total GDP would be at least 20% larger. No kids, no future. It's a gloomy picture.

These trends also contributed directly to the crisis in faith. Fewer kids, smaller families, and higher divorce rates have had a direct impact on churches in terms of lower attendance, fewer vocations, and lighter collection plates. No wonder statistics on faith have been going down.

Catholic churches were hit hard because high abortion rates are concentrated in the large industrial states with the densest Catholic populations. They include states like New York, New Jersey, Illinois, California, Massachusetts, Maryland, and Florida.

I submit that a major crisis of faith among young people coming of age in a permissive, politically correct, pro-abortion culture was entirely predictable.

To believe in God is to believe in one's own future in this life as well as the next. To change the fundamental rules by which we live to encourage the killing of the unborn at the wish or whim of one's own mother is to shatter personal faith to its foundations.

There is also the impact of our total immersion in today's mass culture. The fact is that the average person today spends 52 hours a week watching television or using the internet. And that's not even counting cellphone use in the more than 90% of all homes that have them!

In this "surround-sound" world we live in, how can the average pastor even begin to compete with his 5-to-10-minute sermon on Sunday? The honest truth is: he can't.

To have any impact on the surrounding culture, pastors urgently need the great multiplier of the lay faithful whose daily lives are intertwined with that culture 365 days a year. That presupposes at least a core group of knowledgeable lay leaders who are sensitive to the challenges that our secular culture presents to Christianity today.

We have many such lay people in the pro-life movement today, but we need far more of them willing to take on the task of transforming today's culture of death into a culture of life. How in the world are we going to get them without making pro-life education the core of our new evangelization efforts?

Our own Celebrate Life seminars for young people were designed to do just that. They are based on the recognition that if the pro-life movement can't reach young people before Planned Parenthood does, we will have little chance of changing the abortion culture.

Today, it's not enough to reach out to women who come for an appointment at an abortion clinic. Only 1 in 15,000 young women of child-bearing age do that on any given day. We have to find ways to reach the other 14,999 long before they even consider an abortion.

The best place to begin are the 13-15 year olds attending youth ministries or preparing for Confirmation. Our research shows that 2 out of 3 of Catholic teens are either confused or already subscribe to pro-choice cliches. We keep our approach inclusive because we want them to feel welcome no matter what their views. How else can we change hearts and minds?

The teens also told us that they wanted to hear from people who could speak from personal experience, so we chose our speakers for their positive, conversion stories. They all have firsthand experience with the life issue in a life-changing way. A former abortion doctor. Women in recovery from abortion. A young woman disabled from birth. A single Mom who takes great care of her kids while attending college and holding down a part-time job.

To measure changes in attitude, we use pre- and post-seminar surveys. To our surprise, only 35% qualified as "pro-life" in the pre-seminar surveys. But that group increased by 50% in the post-seminar surveys, proving that a pro-life majority is achievable with the right approach.

Here is a more detailed breakdown:

- Pre-seminar, only 15% qualified as "pro-life without exception." But these strong pro-lifers increased by 75% in our post-seminar surveys. A major breakthrough.
- Another 26% were "pro-life with exceptions" for rape, incest and the life and health of the mother. Post-seminar, this "moderate pro-life" group increased by 20%, but many of them also made the big jump to the "strong pro-life" category.

- Pre-seminar, 37% identified with the "confused middle" who often hold contradictory beliefs such as "abortion is always wrong, but it should still be legal." Post-seminar, this group *declined* by 33%, all of whom moved up to the stronger pro-life categories.
- Pre-seminar, 19% were "pro-choice with restrictions." This "moderate pro-choice" group *declined* by 20% -- with all of those who changed becoming more pro-life.
- The 6% in the "strong pro-choice" category was the only group that resisted change. However, some volunteered that the seminar gave them "a lot to think about." We viewed that as a sign of greater openness to pro-life views.

A huge benefit was the improved ability of pro-life teens to articulate their own pro-life views with their peers. Building an articulate pro-life majority enhances social support for pro-life decisions, and reduces the influence of uninformed popular cliches surrounding the idea of choice. Nothing makes a cliché sound emptier than honest, down-to-earth discussion.

Making abortion "less popular" can also significantly affect future abortion rates among teens and young adults. Doing this on a large scale is the key to changing today's abortion culture.

At its current rate of decline (1% a year), abortion could still be around 200 years from now. However, if we can increase that rate of decline to 5% or 10% a year, the cultural war will be substantially over within 20 to 30 years. That's a goal worth shooting for!

However, such a goal is only achievable if more of our churches wake up, join hands and make pro-life education a central part of their evangelization effort.

The place to begin is clearly with our young people. It is the young who are feeding the pipeline that ends at Planned Parenthood or some other abortion mill. That's why the young are the best place for churches to begin turning that tide.

The early teens need to become a time of pro-life awakening for our young people. We need to help them prepare for the challenges they are bound to meet as they move on through high school to college and beyond.

That, in essence, is the reason for our "Celebrate Life" seminars.

Movement for a Better America is a small, but effective pro-life think tank that specializes in developing more effective pro-life strategies. However, we're not big enough to roll out this kind of program nationally. That's why we wish to empower the entire pro-life movement -- and our churches -- by encouraging them to take this program on.

We're willing to share our experience with these "Celebrate Life" seminars with any interested church or pro-life group. If you would like to start your own seminar team, we'll be glad to help you recruit and train that team. We'll also continue doing our own seminars.

American Life League is the first national pro-life organization to say "yes," but we're wide open to working with churches, schools, and other pro-life organizations that wish to expand their educational outreach and do it in a way that can have optimum impact.

To find out more, contact Dennis Howard at Movement for a Better America, Inc., PO Box 472, Mount Freedom, NJ 07970-0472. Or email me at mbaforlife@gmail.com. Donations to help fund this program can also be made at: <http://www.movementforabetteramerica.org>