

The Ten-Year Anniversary of *Renewing the Vision*

Reflection on Its Impact for Catholic Youth Ministry

Arthur David Canales

The comprehensive vision set out in *Renewing the Vision* remains vital to the church's ministry with adolescents. The anniversary of this document offers an occasion to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses and to recommit ourselves to its plan for youth ministry in light of today's challenges.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' document *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (1997), a sixty-page booklet and the "gold-standard" for Catholic youth ministry in this country. *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (RTV) is the second official Catholic youth ministry document published in the United States; the first was a *Vision of Youth Ministry* (1976) and was much more modest in scope, purpose, and theology.

The 1976 *Vision* introduced youth ministry to the Catholic Church and to Catholic teenagers. The first document focused on the biblical narrative of the road to Emmaus, and its guiding scriptural motif was one of companionship and mission, that is, Catholic youth ministry is rooted in friendships and relationships (*Vision*, 6).

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The earlier document's ecclesiology was limited to the local community or parish and needed theological and pastoral *aggiornamento*. RTV moved beyond the first document and integrated the teachings of Pope John Paul II with the theological reflection and pastoral experience of the Catholic youth ministry community. RTV takes Catholic youth ministry from the local level to the national level and situates ministry to adolescents as the right and responsibility of the whole Catholic Church, thus expanding its vision from parochial to universal.

This article reflects upon the impact that RTV has made upon Catholic youth ministry in the United States of America since its publication by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The first half of the essay will concentrate on one area that has significantly affected Catholic youth ministry over the past ten years, that is, the pastoral reality of comprehensive Catholic youth ministry, which has three parts that need to be addressed: (a) goals, (b) themes, and (c) components. In the second part, I will assess the strengths and limitations of RTV and offer insights from two pastoral practitioners from two very different ministry positions who have familiarity with the document's integration and implementation.

Comprehensive Catholic Youth Ministry

The buzzword in Catholic youth ministry circles over the past ten years is *comprehensive*, which describes a systematic and integrated approach to youth ministry outlined in RTV and is the preferred approach to *doing* ministry with adolescents (Canales 2006, 206–07). The U.S. bishops offer a set of generic guidelines and a working definition for youth ministers and youth catechists to follow while doing comprehensive youth ministry:

The comprehensive framework for ministry with adolescents is designed to

1. utilize each of the Church's ministries—advocacy, catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, prayer and worship—in an integrated approach to achieving the three goals for ministry with adolescents;
 2. provide developmentally appropriate programs and activities that promote personal and spiritual growth for young and older adolescents;
 3. enrich family life and promote the faith growth of families of adolescents;
 4. incorporate young people fully into all aspects of church life and engage them in ministry and leadership in the faith community;
 5. create partnerships among families, schools, churches, and community organizations in a common effort to promote positive youth development.
- (RTV, 20)

The guidelines for comprehensive youth ministry are an important dimension for Catholic youth ministry and an element that was lacking in the 1976 document.

Robert J. McCarty, executive director of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, observes, “Perhaps one of the most significant shifts in youth ministry in the past decade is the attention to families as the primary context for young people, and therefore, an important dimension of comprehensive youth ministry” (2005, 14). Comprehensive youth ministry means that youth ministers and adolescents alike become increasingly aware that the Catholic faith is for them—all of it—not only selective parts. That is to suggest, ministry to adolescents ideally moves beyond a ministry that focuses on “my youth group” or “my parish” to embrace a larger ecclesiastical worldview: universal church, preferential option for the poor, family, multiculturalism, intergeneration, diocese, etc.

Catholic comprehensive youth ministry typically involves four foci: (1) arranging events to protect youth from temptation; (2) trying to gain youth’s interests through entertainment, fun, and games; (3) involving youth in both community responsibilities and parish ministries; and (4) challenging youth to transform society by living the Gospel message (Canales 2005a, 9–10). These four foci are rudimentary in dealing with adolescent attendance, leadership, spirituality, theology, and diversity; however, any overuse of one focus may lead to a dysfunctional youth ministry.

RTV identifies three adolescent-specific areas for youth ministers to integrate and implement into a comprehensive youth ministry: (1) goals, (2) themes, and (3) components, which all warrant consideration.

The Goals of Catholic Youth Ministry

RTV offers the Church and youth ministers three goals to situate in the environment of parish life. The goals are meant to be the driving force behind Catholic youth ministry and to be foundational for RTV. Sean Reynolds, director of youth ministry for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, Ohio, maintains that the goals within RTV are archetypal for youth ministry praxis and the “three cornerstones of any youth ministry building project” (218). The goals are as follows:

- Goal 1: To *empower* young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in our world today (RTV, 9).
- Goal 2: To *draw* young people to responsible participation in the life, mission, and work of the Catholic faith community (RTV, 11).
- Goal 3: To *foster* the total personal and spiritual growth of each young person (RTV, 15).

The three goals are an excellent resource and reminder for youth ministers to learn, to integrate, and to implement into Catholic adolescent ministry.

The first goal emphasizes the need for young Catholics to become Christian disciples and answer with authenticity Jesus' invitation to "Come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). The second goal stresses the importance of Christian responsibility and participation in the life of a parish community and local church (diocese). RTV states, "The ministry of community life is not only what we do (actively), but *who* we are (identity) and *how* we interact (relationships)" (34). The third goal accentuates the holistic nature of the young person and addresses teenage spiritual needs. Catholic educator Michael Carotta discusses adolescent spiritual growth through three dimensions:

- (a) the way one relates to God through prayer, worship, and religious practices (vertical);
- (b) the way one relates to God through moral interactions with others (horizontal);
- and (c) the way one experiences God's ability to help deal with internal pain, stress, loneliness, fear, sadness, anger, and other emotions (internal) (43).

These three dimensions help youth ministers to understand adolescents as total persons and not pressure them to live up to adult standards and unrealistic expectations.

The goals are a significant contribution to RTV and assist diocesan directors of youth ministry and youth ministers to become comprehensive in scope, attuned to the rich heritage of the Catholic Church. The three goals also indicate that the Catholic Church loves and cares for adolescents and desires to see them grow intellectually, physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

The Themes of Catholic Youth Ministry

The RTV highlights seven themes undergirding comprehensive youth ministry that youth ministers, directors of religious education, and parish priests should be aware of for integration into the curriculum. The curriculum should be: (1) developmentally appropriate, (2) family friendly, (3) intergenerational, (4) multicultural, (5) community-wide collaborative, (6) inclusive of leadership development, and (7) flexible and adaptive with programming. These seven themes are to be incorporated not only into the lives of adolescents but equally woven into the life of the parish. It is absolutely essential for effective adolescent ministry that it be carried out in a way that does justice to these seven themes. RTV suggests that youth ministry provide "experiences, programs, activities, strategies, resources, content, and processes to address the unique developmental, [spiritual,] and social needs of younger and older adolescents both as individuals and as members of families" (20). These seven themes will empower youth ministers to do significant work and will lead to their overall understanding of a balanced and holistic approach to adolescent ministry, one that has the greatest potential for reaching the largest spectrum of Catholic adolescent population.

The Components of Catholic Youth Ministry

RTV lists eight components that empower and equip youth ministers with the various areas in which they can program and assimilate the subtleties and nuances that help to create a comprehensive youth ministry. The majority of RTV is taken up by this critically important section that describes these eight components of youth ministry. RTV notes:

These components provide a framework for the Catholic community to *respond* to the needs of young people and to involve young people in sharing their unique gifts with the larger community. They provide a structure for the Church's ministry with adolescents, while encouraging local creativity in developing programs, activities, and strategies for each component. Each ministry component supports and enhances the others. A comprehensive ministry with adolescents provides balance among all eight components. This balance can be achieved throughout a year or a season of programming. Even a single program or strategy can incorporate several of the ministry components, as in the case of a retreat program. (26)

These eight components for a Catholic comprehensive youth ministry are: (1) the ministry of advocacy, (2) the ministry of catechesis, (3) the ministry of community life, (4) the ministry of evangelization, (5) the ministry of justice and service, (6) the ministry of leadership development, (7) the ministry of pastoral care, and (8) the ministry of prayer and worship. Greg "Dobie" Moser, diocesan director of youth ministry for Cleveland, Ohio, offers solid descriptions of the eight comprehensive components:

- *Advocacy* challenges the faith and social community to consider how well the needs of young people are being met and how well young people are integrated into the community.
- *Catechesis* fosters youth's relationship with Jesus while deepening their understanding, practice, and knowledge of the Catholic faith.
- *Community life* nurtures the faith of young people by creating meaningful relationships with their peers and with caring adults and by fully integrating young people into the community.
- *Evangelization* proclaims and witnesses to the reign of God made flesh in Jesus and invites young people to enter into relationship with Jesus and lives as his disciples.
- *Justice and Service* encourages young people to live fully Jesus' command to love one another, responding to the human needs of the local and global community while working to transform the social structures that perpetuate injustice.

- *Leadership development* affirms the gifts of adults and youth for ministry and creates opportunities for those gifts to be realized and utilized.
- *Pastoral care* promotes healthy adolescent development, supports the family, and responds to young people in need.
- *Prayer and Worship* celebrates the faith of young people through personal and communal prayer and liturgical experiences and incorporates young people in the sacramental and worship life of the faith community. (Moser, 37–38)

These eight ministry components are the “backbone” of RTV and provide the proper guidance, accumulated wisdom, and effective practices to direct youth ministers on a path of *doing* resourceful adolescent ministry. Taken together, the eight components present youth ministers with the essential framework of comprehensive ministry to adolescents and establish the critical areas that must be pastorally executed within youth ministry if it is going to be truly successful and authentically Catholic.

The goals, themes, and components of RTV help guide youth ministers to become more aware of comprehensive youth ministry. RTV has made pastoral practitioners of Catholic youth ministry become acutely aware of being comprehensive in preparation, outreach, and theology. The document clearly and correctly calls Catholic bishops and priests, parents and youth, and volunteer adult leaders and youth ministers alike to cooperate fully in the vision of comprehensive youth ministry, a scheme that promotes parish life and ecclesial life over individual youth ministries and calls forth adolescents to participate fully in the rich legacy of the Catholic Church.

The Strengths and Limitations of Renewing the Vision

For ten years RTV has provided bishops, pastors, and youth ministers with a clear “blueprint” for doing comprehensive Catholic youth ministry, and they have tried to successfully connect with and put into practice RTV in parishes and dioceses around the nation. Both lay and ordained ministers in the church can benefit from continued study of this document and implementation of its vision in parish ministry. Like all ecclesial documents, theological models, and programs for ministry, RTV has strengths and limitations. Acknowledging its assets and drawbacks can help us move forward as we look to the future.

Strengths of Renewing the Vision

There are numerous qualities that RTV has recommended for Catholic youth ministry. The first positive feature of RTV is that bishops, pastors, youth ministers,

and DREs have a reference point to guide adolescent ministry in a coherent fashion. The eight comprehensive components give direction to pastoral theologians to empower youth ministers to lead teenagers into a personal relationship with God. The theological and pastoral framework of RTV is insightful and relevant because it allows for an effective youth ministry of planning, development, and growth.

A second advantage is that RTV requires youth ministers to be unitive. RTV moves youth ministers to think beyond their parish boundaries and to be unitive in their pastoral scope because a single youth ministry cannot be an island standing alone. RTV accentuates the fact that parish youth ministry must be connected to the larger church infrastructure and support, which means that youth ministers ideally should be allied to other youth ministers in their region or deanery within

a diocese. Unitive implies that youth ministry is not about doing ministry as a “lone ranger,” but being part of the “bigger team” of youth ministry. Being unitive calls every parish youth ministry into accountability and reliability because there may be times when the diocese needs the support of several youth ministers to plan, organize, and implement diocesan events, such as youth conferences, diocesan days of prayer, or mission trips.

A third benefit is that RTV calls youth ministers to be collaborative. Catholic youth ministry must be collaborative, that is, parish youth ministers would be wise to be involved with the life of the parish and help young people assimilate into the different ministries in the parish community. Adolescents, too, should make the effort to become involved in the life of their congregation. Collaborative means that youth ministers are

diligently trying to link their ministry efforts with other efforts within the parish. Teenagers should always experience the larger life of the parish and not simply be part of the youth ministry. It would be pastorally prudent if each parish priest became familiar with and knew the names of the core adolescents or peer leaders within the youth ministry. Teenagers should never feel or be disconnected from their family of faith.

Limitations of Renewing the Vision

The first criticism of the document is that, unfortunately, the ministry component of “prayer and worship” is listed last of all the eight components. We should take to heart the ancient axiom that there is an intimate and vital relationship between the way we worship and what we believe (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). Therefore, prayer and worship should definitely be the first component to highlight the

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importance of *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* for Catholic identity and spirituality. The ways of praying and believing always entail the *lex vivendi* (“law of living”) (Irwin, 29–30, 294–95) and the fostering of adolescent Christian discipleship.

A second concern of this document is that there is no real attention given to Sacred Scripture. The Bible is not listed as a viable ministry component, and it is only mentioned in passing that teenagers should receive training in “Old Testament, the Gospels, and Paul and his Letters” (33). The brief attention to the Word of God is simply not enough. It is a regrettable oversight to an otherwise rich document. If RTV is not overt about the importance of studying Scripture and biblical theology, then youth ministers will not be thoroughly convinced about the Bible’s transformative nature and the powerful narratives that are contained within its pages.

A third drawback is with the component entitled “leadership development.” RTV simply suggests that youth ministry coordinators and teams have proper leadership training, but it does not offer any particular Christian leadership style to integrate into a comprehensive youth ministry. There are many types of leadership, and Christian leadership is one particular branch within the field of leadership studies, but it also has several “flavors,” such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, moral leadership, and spiritual leadership (Canales 2004, 45–46). RTV surprisingly does not mention any of those types, and Christian leadership is too important to be neglected.

Challenges That Remain

Trying to further theological and pastoral consensus regarding the impact that RTV has had upon Catholic youth ministry in the United States, I posed the following question to two people who have two different ecclesial ministries relating to youth ministry. The question that was asked, via electronic mail, is as follows: “What are the strengths and limitations of *Renewing the Vision* from your ministry perspective and vantage point?” The first response is from Robert J. McCarty, D. Min., executive director for the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry. McCarty offers the following observations concerning RTV:

Renewing the Vision heralded several shifts in our overall vision of youth ministry. The original 1976 Vision of Youth Ministry used the Emmaus story from Luke’s Gospel as the primary image for youth ministry. This was an accompaniment approach, where we walked with our young people along their faith and personal journey. Although this is still important, RTV proposed, as a first shift, the discipleship image where young people are sent out on mission and ministry. Today we call the young Church to a great adventure, to be disciples of Jesus Christ, called to transform the world.

A second shift occurred in methodology or approach. Youth ministry has—or must—shift from youth group to youth groupings. We can no longer rely on a single youth gathering or community to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse youth population. In terms of culture, ethnic communities, family, lifestyle and geographic setting, our young people have a wide range of needs, interests, resources, time, and even spiritualities. . . .

A third shift is one of emphasis . . . on evangelization—the genuine proclamation of the Good News of Jesus—and on catechesis—the deepening of our understanding and our commitment. And effective evangelization and catechesis must lead towards an engagement with the world through justice and service. . . .

Conversely, the Catholic Church is now challenged to enhance RTV. First, youth ministry leaders will increasingly move from seeing themselves as missionaries to youth and to youth culture, bringing the Gospel and the Church into their lived reality, to being advocates for young people in both the Church and in the societal arena. . . .

Second, we are challenged to intentionally assist young people in fostering their Catholic identity. . . . We need a catechesis that touches their head, heart and hands—and that is anchored in a spiritual home—and a catechesis that provides a language for their experiences of God!

Finally, the third challenge, we—and the entire People of God—are challenged to renew parish life. Regular Sunday Eucharist (Mass) attendance is decreasing dramatically and youth's connection with parish life is increasingly tenuous. . . . This requires that we no longer think of our ministry as involving only youth. The significant impact that family has on the spiritual beliefs and practices of young people and an emphasis on the importance of intergenerational experiences in healthy adolescent development are clearly pointing towards an evolving model for youth ministry. . . . We in youth ministry need to bring our gifts in liturgy, justice and service, pastoral care, prayer, and catechesis to the broader faith community. . . .

McCarty's reflections remind the entire church that youth ministry is a process and that the entire people of God must be a vehicle that helps adolescents learn, grow, and bloom along their journey of conversion.

The second response is from Gregory M. Aymond, bishop of Austin, Texas. Bishop Aymond has the following comments regarding RTV:

RTV reminds us in a very profound way that adolescents are special to God and to the Church. The youth need and deserve our care, compassion, and spiritual formation, and they do indeed make a difference in the life of our Church and our society. Their lives, faith, and spiritual formation must be at the center of our ministry and our concern. The document also acknowledges that the family

has the primary responsibility, particularly parents, to form their children; the Church's ministry must support, enhance, and assist them in this important lifelong task.

I believe that RTV has had many positive effects. It has challenged us to *empower* young people to live as disciples and to be authentic, and strong witnesses of faith in their daily lives. RTV has challenged us to find creative ways, on the parish and diocesan level, for our youth to take an active part in the life of the Church. In our diocese, the document has helped us in the development of Christian leadership programs in order that our young people may see their potential as Christian disciples and leaders of the Church. Another positive effect from RTV has been a greater attention to the development of a sound prayer life among our young people. The development of music for youth and helping them to see Eucharist as a center of their lives has made a difference in our Church and particularly in the Diocese of Austin. . . .

There are some challenges that are presented in RTV, which we as a Church have not fulfilled and taken seriously enough. First, I do not believe that catechesis in many youth programs is given adequate attention. . . . Second, in most youth ministries there are numerous opportunities for social justice and service. On the other hand, I find lacking the important ingredient of theological reflection on the experience and bringing it into a prayerful context. Third, in our diocese we have many gifted people who are exceptionally generous in offering themselves as youth ministers. However, the majority has not actually been theologically trained in youth ministry and has a less than adequate knowledge of Scripture and ecclesiastical teachings. Albeit their work is indeed needed and appreciated, many of them are self-appointed ministers and are actually not prepared to do the vital ministry that has been entrusted to them. Fourth, our young people today are longing for Catholic devotions. I think we need to meet adolescents where they are in order to help them to learn not just the devotion, but the theological meaning behind those devotions. It is an opportunity to give teenagers a healthy approach to devotions and to help them to prevent superstition or meaningless rituals.

. . . RTV is a document that will continue to challenge the Church in order that we will truly be of service to our young people and help them to grow in a deeper and more meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ and in service to his Church.

Bishop Aymond notes challenges that remain and reminds the church that young people need competent youth ministers.

The strengths and limitations of RTV vary in scope but indicate that adolescent ministry is alive and thriving in the Catholic community. RTV has left an indelible mark upon Catholic youth ministry. One can only hope that Catholic youth ministry will continue to flourish as more documents are written and as more faithful

ecclesial ministers emerge to lead young people toward theological, pastoral, and spiritual transformation.

It has often been said within youth ministry circles that “adolescents are the *present* church and the *future* leaders of the church.” RTV helps the church recognize and live the truth of that statement. After ten years of connecting, integrating, and assimilating RTV within Catholic youth ministry in the United States, it is clear that the purpose of the document is to guide and mentor youth ministers in their quest to facilitate spiritual and pastoral transformation in the lives of adolescents, a daunting task indeed, but one that is well worth the investment.

The journey of youth ministry is not complicated, but at times can be arduous and may take detours along the way as youth ministers leave parishes, pastors change assignments, and bishops retire. The challenge is to keep comprehensive youth ministry at the forefront of every Catholic parish. Youth ministry is integral to the life of the Catholic Church, and further implementing RTV will help foster adolescent Christian disciples and future Christian leaders. In the final analysis, the purpose of *Renewing the Vision* to help youth ministers assist adolescents to become the best they can be in Jesus the Christ and to become authentic young Christian disciples remains an urgent task.

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