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Vatican admits it doesn't fully understand youth culture

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The Vatican's culture ministry warned Thursday that the Catholic church risks losing future generations if it doesn't learn how to understand young people, their language and their culture.

The Pontifical Council for Culture invited sociologists, Web experts and theologians to a three-day, closed-door event Feb. 6-9 aimed at studying "emerging youth cultures."

According to a working paper released ahead of the meeting, the church risks "offering answers to questions that are not there" if it doesn't learn "the cultural reality of young people."

A study released in October by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life showed that young people are increasingly disconnected from religion, with one in three Americans aged 18-29 describing themselves as religiously unaffiliated.

Msgr. Melchor Sanchez de Toca, undersecretary of the Vatican's culture department, said in an interview that the church's youth problem is not just "quantitative" -- evidenced by a decline in key indicators, such as baptisms and church attendance -- but also "qualitative."

The youth world, he said, has changed "radically," but the church "is still offering what it has been offering for the past 500 years."

"We keep on giving the same answers but the way questions are posed is now totally different."

Even if youth culture is often marked by individualism, superficiality and hedonism, the council's president, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, said during a Thursday press conference that its "diversity" is "not only negative" but "contains surprising seeds of fruitfulness and authenticity."

In his effort to understand young people's language and feelings, Ravasi confessed to listening to a CD by the late British pop singer Amy Winehouse, noting that "a quest for meaning emerges even from her distraught music and lyrics."

In a first for a Vatican meeting, the event will be opened by a rock concert by Italian Christian rock band The Sun.

Participants, mostly bishops and Catholic lay leaders, will also hear from young Catholic activists from countries such as Indonesia and Madagascar, while American blogger Pia de Solenni will speak on the "emotional alphabet" of young generations.

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