Spirituality



Teenagers play soccer during the annual Labor Day Encuentro Sept. 5, 2022, at Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, N.Y. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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When I pulled up to the high school that my two oldest sons attend in downtown Minneapolis, the excitement was buzzing. Students were clapping and cheering for their classmates as they entered the doors for the first day. Teachers and staff stood on the sidewalk welcoming everyone to the new school year.

I couldn't help but grin, remembering the excitement and nervous energy of my own school days. But then I pulled up to the end of the drop-off line and saw two Minneapolis police officers standing guard near the entrance.

My heart sank.

In an instant, the sunny morning turned to gray. I was simultaneously grateful for the officers' protective presence and grieved at the need to have them there. Starting with the shooting at Annunciation Catholic School last August and continuing through the turbulent months when the whole world's eyes were on Minneapolis, the students of this city have suffered far beyond anything I experienced in my youth.

As a student in the only Catholic high school in Flint, Michigan, I was no stranger to violence and crime in the streets, even right outside our school doors. But we never had a year like the one that my kids and their classmates have lived through.

I can only imagine what it is like to grow up in the world we have given our children.

Yet, as I rounded the corner to turn back toward home, I saw two girls dancing in the sun. Near the front door, a speaker was blasting joyful music to welcome everyone back for a fresh new year. Right across from the police officers, these two students were grinning and dancing, laughing and singing like everything was full of hope and joy.

In an instant, everything changed again. I grinned right back, thanking God for the gift of teenagers: the ones who remind us how to hope.

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I've long loved the energy, optimism and enthusiasm that young people bring — even their willingness to call out adults for our own shortcomings and call us into a better version of ourselves. Teenagers continue to be much maligned in today's society. As a mother of five sons, I can't tell you how many times strangers have rolled their eyes and told me, "Just wait till they're teenagers."

But God has given us the gift of the young to remind us what matters most.

In his Rule written in the year 500, St. Benedict stated that whenever an important matter needs to be decided in the monastery, the abbot must call the whole community together, not just the elders: "The reason we have said that all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best."

What a profound reorientation: to listen to the youngest.

Imagine if we took this approach to our parishes, schools, families and the wider community. When do we ask the young for their perspectives? When do we draw from their examples?

Wisdom is not reserved for those advanced in years. Jesus himself said, "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, you have revealed them to the childlike" (Matthew 11:25).

Throughout the history of Christianity, young people have changed the world and the church. From Mary, the mother of God, to Joan of Arc, from Francis of Assisi to Carlo Acutis, our calendar of saints is bursting with young people who said yes to God in the face of fierce resistance, often from the adults around them.

Today as I watched teenagers dance, heads tipped back in joy, delighted and defiant in the face of the world that would steal their hope, I remembered the fierce resilience of humanity. I pray that God will grant them and all young people a peaceful, fruitful school year ahead. But I also pray that we adults will be wise

enough to keep children and teens at the center of our care.

The young speak the yes we always need to hear.