

Throughout history the church has always known that religious education was a life-long process. The faithful of all age groups were taught through sermons, travelling preachers, catechumenates, and mystery and morality plays. Only a small part of the population received formal religious education. It is only over the last hundred years that schools have been set up for the education of all children. In Australia this saw both secular and religious education become part of the classroom program. We have seen the age at which a child leaves school stretch from 12 to 14 to 18.

Interestingly, during the same period, this group of over 12s also became identified as a separate age group called "teenagers". This age sub-group has been developed, and to a large extent exploited, by the media, fashion, music, entertainment and leisure industries. Catechists meet teenagers in high schools and find themselves in situations similar to the early missionaries. These teachers are trying to build links between the culture of the teenagers and the culture and heritage of the church - a culture of which they may be largely unaware or to which they may have little access."

Catechists need to understand the forces at work within the teenage culture so they can identify elements in that culture which may help introduce these young people to their religious heritage. Today's teenagers live in a time of unprecedented change, many of them have been cut off from a heritage which may seem alien to them but to which they are heirs. Just like the early missionaries, catechists are working in an area where the potential harvest is great but the harvesters are few. We are always looking for catechists to teach high school special religious education classes. So, is the lot of the scripture teacher in high school more stressful than it used to be? Are teenagers today really more difficult than those of the last generation? Should we just give up on them?

Here are a few comments on "teenagers" collected over the years:

*The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age; They are impatient of all restraint; They talk as if they alone know everything. As for the girls, they are foolish, and immodest and unwomanly in speech, behaviour and dress. **Peter the Hermit 1083 A.D.***

*Our young men have grown slothful. There is not a single honourable occupation for which they will toil night and day. Without strength, without energy, they add nothing to the gifts with which they were born - then they complain of their lot. **Seneca 1 A.D.***

*Youth today now love luxury; they show disrespect for elders. They no longer rise when their elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company.....and tyrannise their teachers. **Socrates 400 B.C.***

*I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for all youth are reckless beyond words....When I was young, we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are impatient of restraint. **Hesiod 800 B.C.***