

**The Next Generation:
A Case Study of Roman Catholic Youth in Suva**

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Abstract

Youth communities, as well as religious ones, are thriving in modern Fijian culture. The young people identify with a changing way of life, while those who are religious often cling to tradition and order. Despite this apparent contradiction of lifestyles, most young people in Fiji do consider themselves to be religious.

This paper is a study on the identity of young, Roman Catholic Fijians in Suva, Fiji. I joined the Sacred Heart Parish youth group and worked with the members to gain an understanding of their lives as young, Catholic individuals in modern Fiji. I have also looked at their identity from another point of view, through the eyes of Catholic lay people and clergy.

It was my intent to uncover exactly what issues resulted from the unique identity that young, religious Fijians embody. I also wanted to discover the role that they play within their community. I have found and analyzed many of these issues, and I have made educated suggestions as to what the youth and the rest of the Church must do to resolve certain problems so that they will be better able to move forward.

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Introduction

Religion is a very large part of life for many Fijians. Christianity is the cultural norm for the vast majority of the indigenous Fijian population, and it has a huge impact on who they are as a people. It is clear that religion, and particularly Christianity, has made the Fijian culture into what it is today, and one cannot fully understand modern Fijian life and culture without first realizing this fact. The Roman Catholic Church is presently the second largest sect of Christianity in Fiji.

Throughout the country, church-based youth groups are a popular place for young people to gather as a community. The Roman Catholic Cathedral, Sacred Heart Parish in Suva, follows that example and has a lively youth group. This group has struggled throughout the history of the parish. There have been times in the past where it has been full of life, and other times when it has dwindled down to a small group of boys drinking grog together, with almost no religious significance or emphasis. Just recently this year, however, Sydney, Australia was the host of the Roman Catholic Church's regularly-occurring World Youth Day. World Youth Day is actually a week-long event that is put on every two or three years which brings millions of youths from all over the world together and focuses on their place within the Church. Many of the youths in Suva were given the opportunity to attend this program, and because of it, the youth group at Sacred Heart parish was revived and remains a vibrant, active community. There are, however, many issues and difficulties that they face as young people.

The way in which I came to study the Catholic youth in Suva is very unique, as I had not intended this to be the focus of my studies while in Fiji. I am

a practicing Catholic myself, and when I arrived in Suva, I attended Mass at the Sacred Heart Cathedral. I happened to meet a member of the youth while waiting for a ride home, and he kindly invited me to join their group. Realizing that it would be a wonderful opportunity to get to know other people my age who shared my religious beliefs, I accepted the invitation and began attending meetings. Through these meetings, I got to know the young people and I learned that even though things seemed to be going well for them, and they were engaged in several different projects, there were certain issues that they dealt with that were unique to their being young, Fijian Catholics. These issues intrigued me and I knew that I had to look deeper into them.

The young people here have so much energy that can be used to achieve many wonderful things, both within the Church and within the larger community. I have attempted to research exactly what the youth are doing with this energy, and what is holding them back from doing and achieving more. I have also tried to understand more fully what it means to be a young Catholic in Suva, and how that affects these particular individuals.

Methodology

When I first started my research, I did not know exactly what areas I wanted to focus on or what I was trying to find. I knew that the Catholic youth here were a very interesting and unique group who had a lot to share, and because of that I knew that there would be a lot to gain from looking deeper into their issues. I soon found that there were many factors that affected the youth, many of which came as a surprise to me and were vastly different from my own experiences. From then on, I was determined to speak to more people and find out as much as I could about the difficulties that the youth face as young, Fijian Catholics.

The amount of time that I had was definitely a constraint. I was fortunate enough to have joined the Sacred Heart youth group early in the semester, so I got to know a lot about the specific youths that participate regularly at Sacred Heart Parish. This research, however, could have been much more complete if I had enough time to get to know the youths of other parishes as well. The issues of the youth in Suva are most likely vastly different from the youth in other areas throughout Fiji.

The fact that I had joined the youth group early on in the semester, and the fact that I had gotten to know the youth as friends before even considering this as a topic for my research has ended up being both a strength and a weakness for me as a researcher. Because I had already built personal relationships, I feel that the interviews that I conducted with the youth members were more relevant to their reality. I also feel that the responses that I received

during these interviews were much more honest and went deeper than interviews conducted with a stranger would have been. I have also been fortunate to have plenty of my own observations and information from a period of time that is longer than the designated four-week ISP period. Unfortunately, because I have gotten to know and care for many of these people, and because I am a Catholic youth myself, my opinions and views that are expressed in this paper may have ended up being biased. I will try to be as objective as possible in writing this paper, but I believe that it impossible and even flawed to be completely so. Though my work has a been affected through the personal relationships that I have formed and my ability to identify myself as a Roman Catholic youth, the positives that come from this have far outweighed the negatives.

In order to formally conduct my research, I stayed in the Suva area throughout most of November and interviewed a large number of individuals. I formally interviewed a number of the youth, by which I mean specifically the members of the Sacred Heart youth group ages 14 to 27. I also participated in their weekly meetings and had informal discussions with many of the members about themselves and the issues that they face as young Catholics. I feel that I was able to gather a lot of information in this way and gain a deeper understanding of who the youth see themselves as being, as well as how they view the church and their place within it. I wanted to have a different perspective of the youth as well, so I had discussions and formal interviews with a large variety of established members of the Catholic community around Suva. These people came from a variety of backgrounds, but were all Roman Catholic, and all

had come into contact with the Sacred Heart youth group and had knowledge about their specific group.

A Brief History of the Roman Catholic Church in Fiji

In order to more fully understand the current context of religion in Fijian culture, it is important to go back to the roots of Christianity, particularly Roman Catholic Christianity. The first Catholic missionaries came to Fiji in 1844. "On August 1 1844 four French Catholic missionaries, all Marists, were brought to Fiji by their Bishop," (Knox, pg. 1). At this time there were already other Christian missionaries present in the islands, but there was still a great deal of tribal warfare and cannibalism going on. Most of the people did not accept Christianity right away- their society was (and still is) a very communal one, and they have a tradition of respecting their elders and chiefs. The mindset behind Christianity was vastly different than the one Fijians held about their religious beliefs. "Fijians were satisfied with their own religion, and thought of religion as something specific to a particular group of people rather than something of universal application," (Knox, pg. 1). Because of this, conversion on an individual level was not a reality among the Fijian population. The people of Fiji waited until their chiefs converted, particularly Ratu Seru Cakobau, who was the leader of the majority of Fiji at the time. After his conversion, much of the country became more open to this new religion, and Christianity became the norm among the population. Cannibalism and tribal wars diminished and eventually died out all together, but the cultural values of community and the respect of elders prevailed.

The majority of the population Fiji converted to various protestant religions, particularly Methodism. This can be partly attributed to the fact that the

Catholic missionaries were late in their arrival to Fiji, though the Church had its reasons for this. "While protestant missionaries were already at work in the islands, the Catholic Church-equally aware of the needs of the South Pacific-was more cautious. There were complicated negotiations to ensure that the missions were well founded and that the religious faculties for dispensing the sacraments were properly in place before the missionaries were given permission to depart," (Knox, pg. 2). Due to the Catholic Church's more formal structure and emphasis on the sacraments, there was significantly more planning and precautions taken in their missionary endeavors. This structure and sacramental emphasis is consistent with the Church today, both on a global scale and within Fiji.

Despite all of their preparation, the Catholic missionaries still faced many struggles while in Fiji and had a difficult time successfully establishing the Catholic Church here. When they finally did have success, it was because they learned to be flexible and adapted to the Fijian culture and did their part to be viable members of the local community. "The priests learned to speak Fijian and instructed those prepared to listen concerning the Catholic faith. They were often called to tend the sick and comfort the dying. They frequently sat around the yaqona (kava) bowl discussing religion and Fijian customs as well as day-to-day affairs," (Knox, pg. 19).

Today, the Catholic Church is very much alive and vibrant and is a respected, established institution throughout Fiji. Fijian Catholics are as enthusiastic about their faith as their protestant neighbors, regularly attending

Mass on Sundays and showing through example the important role that religion and community play in their lives.

Youth in the Church: The Bigger Picture

The Roman Catholic Church has not always recognized importance of the youth community. However, in more recent years, it has done more to include the youth and employ their unique attributes for the benefit of the greater good. Starting in 1984, the Church began its World Youth Day program for the millions of Catholic youth around the world. There are several other programs and organizations that the Church has put into place to get youth involved. The Catholic Church has largely left it up to individual parishes and diocese to create their own youth programs. This is valid due to the global nature of the Catholic Church. Youth is viewed very differently among the different cultures of the world. A youth group that is set up like the one here in Suva might be appropriate in this culture, but in others it may not be an effective system. From this set-up, many individuals who are not directly connected to church hierarchy have done things for the youth in their own cultures and communities. Some have written books on youth ministry, others have started programs for the youth in their area.

The Catholic Church knows that the youth have a lot to give, but it also knows that they need encouragement, love, and support in order to develop and reach their full potential both within the Church, as well as in every other aspect of their lives. It encourages parents, clergy, and others within the religious community to support the youth and help them reach this potential. The main point that the Church emphasizes about youth is that they need a community in which they are able to find themselves and be themselves. It is the responsibility

of each individual diocese and parish to create this environment for their youth. Throughout the world, some areas have done this and the youth are thriving, while others have failed at this. From my observations and research, I can say that the Catholic community in Fiji is not at the very top in catering to their youth's needs, but they are actively working to improve this and are doing a lot of good for their youth.

What does “Youth” Mean?

A difficulty that I struggled with while doing this research was finding a formal definition of the term “youth” here in Fiji. Youth groups throughout Fiji are inclusive of unmarried people ranging in age from early teens through people well into their thirties, and in some cases even older than that. This is partly because the culture here is one of inclusive community values. While it is generally thought of as a very positive thing to be inclusive to all, it has proven to be at the detriment of some of the younger members of various youth groups. They are taught to have a respect for their elders and often because of this they do not feel free to express their own ideas or opinions in these settings. When they are around people who are much closer to their own age, these young people speak much more freely and act more naturally.

The Youth- the Community's Perspective

While interviewing and discussing the youth with established members of the Catholic community in and around Suva, I asked everyone how they viewed the Catholic youth in Suva. I received a variety of answers, but there were definite similarities and themes that were prevalent in almost all of the responses that I received.

Many individuals who knew the youth before World Youth Day this summer spoke of the vast changes that had taken place because of this event. Before the youth started working towards attending World Youth Day, the group was mainly a social group for young men. The grog culture remains a large part of life here in Fiji, and it certainly affected these people. They would get together, drink grog, and label this social activity as a youth group. There was no real spiritual or sacramental aspect to it. They also did not focus on any sort of outreach or service for the community. Women, younger boys and girls, and people of other cultures really had no place within this group.

Earlier this year, an invitation arrived from a group based in Australia for the youth of the South Pacific nations to attend World Youth Day. This was announced to the entire parish community, and the youth made the decision to attend World Youth Day in Sydney in July. Since this decision, the group has completely turned around and done a lot to improve. They have a new focus on what it means to be a Catholic youth- they focus not only on fellowship and friendship, but also on the sacraments, their personal spiritual and prayer lives, and community outreach and service. They have goals and direction, and

actively work as a team to achieve these goals. The group has become extremely inclusive and is a welcoming community to any young person who wishes to attend. Membership now contains many members of both genders and has a large age range; secondary school students, tertiary students, and young people who no longer attend school all feel at home here.

One of the important things that the group did in order to achieve these changes was hold elections to choose new leaders prior to World Youth Day. The leaders that they chose are wonderful, motivated young people who truly care about the youth and are passionate about their faith. Under their guidance, the youth is flourishing. These leaders do a lot to wake up the hearts of their peers, and they draw them into the group, helping their peers to grow. The youth also receive guidance and support from the parish clergy, and this has been invaluable to them. A common sentiment that I heard from many of the individuals whom I spoke with about the youth was that they really believed in them, and that with the proper guidance they can achieve anything. They try really hard at everything that they do, and they have a lot of potential.

Another common sentiment was that the youth now have a lot going for them. They have the structure to support their spiritual growth and development, with regular personal devotion being supported through weekly adoration and Mass specifically for their group. They are curious about their faith, and they ask a lot of questions. There are a variety of resources available to them to answer these questions, though some individuals did admit that they did not think they did enough to educate these young people. The group is very active and

enthusiastic, and they speak their minds. They are a strong group and are very supportive of each other, and they encourage each other's hopes and aspirations. They are in charge of themselves and take control of their own lives. In the way the world is with all sorts of new technology available for them, they are more fortunate than previous generations have been in that there are more opportunities open to them and they have a larger world to live in. They are very adaptable to change, and this is an important asset in today's Fiji.

Despite all of these positive aspects of being young and Catholic in Suva, it was widely recognized that the youth also live in a tough world and they face a lot of hardships and issues in their everyday lives. Life and culture in Fiji, and more specifically Suva, is in transition today. Though they are a group of unique individuals from a variety of different backgrounds, they face the same difficulties in their lives. Influences such as the media are really making an impact on many people and especially the young people. Broken families are becoming more common, and there is much less stability for them than young people in Fiji have traditionally had. It is easy for them to get lost in the hustle and bustle of every day life, with pressure coming from both the media and their peers to be what the current definition of popular is, instead of being encouraged to be themselves. Life in Suva no longer allows its young people to sit still and really figure out who they are or what they want in life. They want to make their own choices. The young people tend to try a variety of different things and make a lot of mistakes while trying to find their place in the world. Their support of each other is crucial, and in order for this group to remain strong and continue to grow, these young

people really need to encourage each other to come to meetings and participate in the other activities. The youth today are already planning for the next World Youth Day in 2011, and they have a true desire to remain involved. It is going to be a real challenge with everything that is against them.

The more established members of the Catholic community had a lot of good things to say about the youth, and it was apparent that they cared a lot about them. While some of these individuals do a lot and give a lot of their own time and resources to give the youth the support that they need, others admitted that they cannot or do not do enough. They also recognized that the diocese and the individual parishes here can do a lot more for the youth.

When I asked what issues they believed the youth most dealt with in their everyday lives, I received many of the same answers from different people. These answers tended to fall into three main categories of causes; traditional culture, realities of living in Fiji today, and peer pressure.

Issues that resulted from traditional Fijian culture are many of the same issues that people have struggled with for years. The first issue in this group was the most commonly mentioned, and that is yaqona drinking. While yaqona has a very significant place in Fijian culture, many members of this society abuse it. People drink too much and that causes them to become lazy and much less productive. It also creates a much more exclusive community and is not welcoming to all members of society. It has had an effect on the Sacred Heart youth group in the past, with its young male members using it to create an

exclusive social club. It affects many individuals throughout the country in the same way, and remains a prevalent social activity. The youth need to work to maintain their current recognition of its place in society and to not get sucked into the grog culture. They are presently very active and motivated, and it would be very much to their detriment if they allowed this to be compromised by the abuse of a cultural icon. Secondly in this category is the power and respect that is given to superiors. Present day Fijian culture is a result of its rich history. Traditionally, the people lived in villages and obeyed their chief as the unquestionable form of authority. Younger people were also taught to respect their elders. While today the government is set up quite differently, the people still emphasize the respect that one must have for those in positions of power. Today this still includes those of chiefly status, but also extends to other authority figures, including religious leaders. Many of these leaders tend to be older and cling to traditional values. They work to maintain their authority and believe themselves to be in charge. Within this sort of setting, there is no one who is willing to hear the voices of the youth. Young people have a very important gift of original thinking and new ideas; these gifts could be used to benefit everyone in the community. The youth are shy to express themselves to those who have the power to put their ideas into actions because they are taught that they will not be heard. This is reinforced by a history of the youth's sentiments falling on deaf ears. Though many people are starting to realize the value of the youth in the Church community, especially through the example that youth are setting globally through programs such as World Youth Day, the

majority of those who sit in more powerful positions tend to be more focused on maintaining tradition than looking towards the future of the Church and of Fiji. The youth have not been taught how to be leaders, and they need that sort of training and education in order to have successful futures. They are working among themselves and lead each other, but there is a real need for those who are currently the leaders whom they look up to, to give them advice and encouragement. Finally in this category is violence. There is a history of violence in Fijian culture, though many choose not to bring it up. Unfortunately, this culture of violence is extremely prevalent and affects many people in very negative ways. Domestic abuse is high, and little is done about it. Many forms of abuse- physical, emotional, and sexual- are currently huge problems that many choose to ignore. Children are taught from a young age that it is acceptable to hit others as a means of disagreement or disapproval. These issues affect many of the youth in their private lives, and it has a profound affect on how they live today, and will certainly shape their futures. While violence is not an issue within the Church itself, it effects many members of the parish community and thus becomes a concern for all.

There are certain realities of living in Fiji today that make life for young people much more difficult than the lives of youth living elsewhere in the world. The first is that many youth have nowhere to go where they can be themselves. Especially for school aged children, it is important to have a safe environment where they know that they are safe and can be free to express themselves and pursue their individual interests. They need to figure out who they are and who

they want to be. Currently, most school children do not have any place to go, and many turn to negative influences or simply do not do anything at all. As was previously mentioned, the youth in Fiji tend to lack direction in their lives and make many mistakes while trying to find where they belong. While trial and error can be a very beneficial part of life and helps youth to grow, it is essential that in this process there is some sort of positive guidance to help these young people. Youth groups that meet once a week are not an adequate response to this problem. They are very positive in the lives of their members, but more needs to be provided for the youth to achieve all that they are able to in life. Another reality that everyone deals with in Fiji is low employment. Economically, life is difficult for the vast majority of Fijians. The youth go to school and study hard, knowing that even if they do well there is no guarantee that they will have the reward of a good job and economic stability and comfort. Those who have finished school already are struggling to either find a job or work hard at the jobs that they have found. Many are forced to work odd hours and have to cater to the specific demands that their job requires; they know that it is much better to have a hard job than to have no job at all. If they quit a job that they do not like, there is no guarantee that they will get another job. The economic struggle can often take the forefront in someone's life and may prevent individuals from pursuing other goals. People put their own interests and passions aside in order to earn enough money to live on. Lastly in this category is the fact that, presently, Fiji is an extremely multicultural society. While the youth here are very inclusive and friendly among each other, they are lacking in experience in

relating to those of different cultures or religious traditions. They tend to stick together and will be kind and respectful towards all, but there is no real form of outreach or any active attempt towards understanding the other groups among whom they live.

Finally, though certainly not least significant, are the peer pressure issues that the youth deal with on a daily basis. Young people struggle with the temptations of abusing drugs and alcohol for recreation. Smoking is also popular, despite it being common knowledge that it is harmful to one's health. The youth constantly struggle with the temptations of non-marital sex and promiscuity, which are being promoted by today's popular culture but go against some of the core values that the Catholic Church tries to instill in its members. While the Church also has theological reasoning to back its stance on these issues, it also recognizes the harm that can come from them on a very basic human level. Those who are promiscuous and who get themselves involved in illicit sexual activities put themselves at risk of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy, both of these clearly being disruptive to the development of a young person's life. The youth constantly struggle, having to make decisions every day as to whom they will allow to influence them. They make both good and bad decisions, but the struggle seems to be never-ending and pressure continues to push down on them at all times. Many of their peers who are not Roman Catholics do not understand their faith, and often make very judgmental comments to the youth, condemning them for identifying themselves as young Catholics. The youth have to defend themselves and question in their own minds

what it really meant to them to be Catholic. This constant pressure and judgment certainly makes life difficult for all of the Catholic youth.

When asked if the Church does enough to support the local youth with the issues that they face in their lives, nearly everyone said that they did not believe that the Church was doing enough. Several people mentioned workshops and seminars that the Church put on for youth, and there are occasional informational programs for the youth to attend. These are not nearly enough, though, and they do not address a lot of the issues that the youth face. It is mainly individuals or specific groups within the Catholic community who support the youth with these issues. As an institution, however, the Catholic Church here can and should do more for its younger members. Educating the young people on their religion as well as teaching them about other issues that they will not learn about in their schools is something that many people suggested as being potentially beneficial for the youth. Young people struggle with a lot in their lives, and something that formally focuses on the problems that the youth face

The Youth's Place- Past Views on the Present Situation

To be a young, Fijian Roman Catholic means a lot of things, but many people had different opinions as to what the role of the youth actually was within the Church. One thing that remained consistent, however, was that everyone who was not a youth had firm opinions as to what they believed the youth could and should be doing.

Many informants emphasized the importance of the fact that the youth will be the leaders of tomorrow. They should prepare for this by taking leadership positions within the church today. It is important for the youth to be involved in the many aspects of parish life other than the youth group. The youth are still enthusiastic about life and their faith, and they are full of new ideas and opinions than can benefit the greater community. They should share these with everyone. The unique qualities of being young have great power to inspire and renew faith and life where it has died out. Older Fijian Catholics tend to be rigid and set in their ways; from a young age they have been taught about the specific ways that things are done. They often get stuck in a rut or routine, and things that were once exciting about being a Catholic and a Christian may no longer have these qualities. If the youth are allowed to express themselves, their energy and enthusiasm is certainly a powerful tool that can enlighten these older people and allow them to realize what they have long forgotten about their faith. The result of this can be a livelier, energetic, faith-filled community that more actively lives what it teaches. The youth also have the responsibility of encouraging each other and making sure that their peers within the Church are given what they

need as young Catholics. They need to energize each other and keep each other motivated and on the right track. The youth have the responsibility of looking after their own interests and needs; they need to be active in seeking what they want within the Church. It is important for them to be leaders today, and not just tomorrow. Finally, the youth need to not only be ambassadors of the joys of the Catholic faith within their own faith community, but they also need to reach out and be a positive ambassador and influence to the outside world. They are the best candidates to show the world the good that can be done. They embody hope and passion, and these are two things that are greatly needed in the world. If they simply bottle these attributes up and do not share them, that is a great disservice both to themselves and to everyone else. Youth should give their whole selves to the Church. This doesn't mean that they should forget about having any other life, it simply means sharing what they have been given with their faith community. If they did this, or if they even put a portion of the energy that they put into their athletics or other hobbies into the betterment of their faith community, they could do much, much more than they probably realize.

It is recognized that the youth do have a lot of work to do to improve themselves, but the youth cannot be expected to do all of this in the present environment that they are in. Their culture is laid back, and they follow this example, not always taking initiative when they maybe should. When those who are in positions of authority could benefit from the input of the youth, the youth do not always give their opinions because they are not asked for. Also, they won't

argue against authority because that is not culturally acceptable. Fijian society praises conformity, and if the youth go against this conformity even for good reasons, they may be looked down upon for this.

A small portion of today's young people are very active and are good examples of the role that they should be playing within the Church. They are involved, they encourage others, and they embody a passion for their faith that is clear to all. The rest of the youth need to do more to follow this example and not just sit back and do nothing. If they continue to sit around and wait, nothing will happen, and all of the potential that they have will go to waste. The current clergy who look after the youth at Sacred Heart Parish are very good and do a lot to encourage the youth to speak up. They are supportive and teach the youth that they need to be vocal. Through this, and through inspirational events such as World Youth Day, the youth are turning around and doing more for themselves and the community around them.

The Youth- Their World, In Their Eyes

From the youth's point of view, the parish approves of their group since it's renovation and reformation prior to World Youth Day. This does not mean, however, that they receive the support that they really need. The youth recognize and appreciate the positive view of their group that the greater community generally expresses. Previously, the youth group was not respected by the parish and many parents did not allow their children to join the group, as they saw it as a social group with no real direction or focus. Since the group now regularly attends Mass and adoration together, the community sees this and commends them for it. The community service that the group does, such as feeding the poor, is also recognized and appreciated by the parish. Some of the youth feel that they are still viewed through a very critical lens, and they do not feel as though they are taken seriously. The majority of the youth do recognize that there is a great increase in the moral support that they receive from their parish.

The youth generally feel that the clergy have a better sense of who they are when compared to the rest of the church community. The clergy is doing a lot for the youth, in teaching them about the faith and helping them learn what it really means to be a young Catholic in today's world. The clergy know that the youth are tomorrow's leaders, and the youth are encouraged by this. There are some issues in relations among the youth and the clergy, however. Some youth members feel as though they are not completely taken seriously, and they are not given any real responsibilities outside of their own youth group.

Though the parish in general supports its youth, the majority of this support is not backed by any actions. Other than the few parents and caring lay people who come to help out the youth, the rest of the parish does not seem to feel the need to actively engage in furthering the youth's causes or activities. Through my participation in the youth's meetings over several months and regularly attending Mass at this parish, I did not feel as though many of the lay people were interested in the youth at all. While discussing this issue with other youth members, many were unable to say anything that the parish or diocese had done for youth. Several mentioned an inter-parish sports competition and it was also mentioned that the youth had been able to attend World Youth Day because of the support of the rest of their parish. The youth feel that they could benefit from greater support from their entire community, not just the clergy or their own parents.

The youth know best what issues they struggle with on a day-to-day basis. Since they are a vastly diverse group of young people, some deal with issues that are entirely foreign to some of their peers. However, there were certain issues that were prevalent among many of the youth.

The main issue that the most youth mentioned was peer pressure, and the pressure to participate in drinking, clubbing, and other such activities that can have negative consequences. Many also mentioned that they often will receive negative remarks from people who practice different religions. They would respond to these people in defense of their faith, but the youth feel that they are

not adequately educated in the teachings of the Church in order to do this. They then will feel bad about their faith or even doubt it, and some question whether or not the negative things that they hear are valid.

There is a feeling among some members that the lack of active support from the parish is detrimental to their growth and development as young Catholics. At the same time, youth members recognize that is reluctance to lead and a lack of commitment among many members. There are so many distractions, and the youth admit that it is sometimes almost impossible for them to ignore these distractions and it can, at times, pull them away from their faith community.

Many of the youth struggle with financial issues, as well. Those who are in school worry about doing well on exams and getting a job when they graduate. Those who work do whatever their jobs demand, and many members are forced to work during meeting times, thus missing out on the fellowship and spiritual growth that they feel would be to their benefit.

The youth do not feel that the parish or diocese is doing much of anything to help them with these struggles. They turn to their friends and families for support and advice. There is no real structure for the youth to turn to the parish in times of personal need. The parish has not done anything for the youth in order to prevent these issues from occurring in the first place. The young people sometimes turn to their friends in the youth group, but otherwise the youth do not feel they have anywhere to turn within the faith community when it comes to dealing with their struggles.

The Youth's Place- Their Role, Their Way

Stating what the role of the youth is in the Church here in Fiji is not an easy thing. The youth themselves struggle to figure this out. Most of the youth feel that their role is to make a positive impact on others both within the parish community and amongst everyone else whom they come into contact with. Everyone feels that they can do this in different ways. They have been given different gifts and talents, and they generally feel that they should use these for the betterment of all. Some recognize that they will lead the Church in the future, and are actively preparing for this by participating in leadership roles within the youth group and the larger parish. Others feel drawn towards sharing their faith with others, and bringing others into the faith. Some believe that they should focus more on supporting their peers. One youth member shared a saying with me, and that was "If the youth is alive, the church is alive," and from everything that I have gathered, this most adequately states what the youth believe their role to be- simply to be living, active members of the parish. Through this, there will be more life and growth throughout the community.

Analysis

Traditionally, religion in Fiji is a community ordeal. Villages almost always share a common religion. Those who move from their villages to urban areas such as Suva cling to their faith and still do not question it. The majority of the Catholic youth in Suva, and often their parents and generations before them, were born into the Catholic faith. Before this current generation of youth, people simply accepted the religion of their parents and practiced it throughout their lives. They have never been encouraged to question it, because doing so would go against the cultural norm of unquestioning loyalty to authority. The culture is changing, though, and as the youth are exposed to a much greater variety of cultures and people in their everyday lives, they need to be more educated in the teachings of the Catholic Church. The youth desire this education, and they want to be informed about the faith that they live their lives by. The youth are proud of being Catholic, but constant negativity from others easily harms that pride, and it is replaced with shame. If there is not an increase in education, this generation is likely to grow weary of negative comments from those who are spreading misinformation on the Catholic faith, and may fall away from the Church. The youth can take the initiative to educate themselves, but they need to be given adequate resources in order to do this. People are becoming more individualistic in Fiji today, and those in authority in the local Church need to recognize this and respond to the needs that are coming out of this new, multicultural society.

A huge issue which I have mentioned previously is the fact that the youth do not feel that they can share their true feelings or give their honest opinions to

their religious leaders. Most people in the Church recognize this, though not everyone sees it as a problem. Those who value the culture here will continue to discourage the young from speaking out, and they will chastise those who disagree with authority. The youth need to prove to the rest of the community that they have the right to be heard, and if they are allowed to speak, it will benefit everyone, even their leaders. The youth do value their culture, and they have often spoken of the importance that culture has in their individual lives. They believe, however, that their culture is not perfect. While they love it and cherish it despite its imperfections, they know that the world is changing and the Church needs to recognize this. The youth can be instrumental in finding the needed balance. There are ways to maintain respect for elders, cultural traditions, and Church teachings while simultaneously recognizing the realities of the world today, and enabling the Church community to react and adapt to them. The youth are in the best position to facilitate this adaptation, and with the proper guidance and education, they will be able to make informed decisions and keep the Church alive and accessible to everyone.

Traditional culture both causes problems for the Catholic youth here and is beneficial for them. It encourages them to be faithful people, and they are proud to be- it gives them an identity and a personal meaning, without which many believe they would have difficulty finding the inner strength that they use to get through daily life. The most important thing that both the youth and the rest of the Church need to recognize is that the young people are as much a part of Fijian life as their traditional culture is, and both the youth and everyone else will

need to learn to compromise and respect each other. There needs to be increased communications and education for everyone, not just among the youth.

The Catholic Church on a global scale has had an impact on the youth here in a very real way. From a simple invitation to attend World Youth Day, their lives have literally transformed and they now have a place to go to be with their peers, and they are able to live out the faith that is so important to them on a personal and cultural level. They are continuing to grow as a community and in their faith. Everyone sees this as a positive experience, and their current challenge is to keep it going. The youth are aware of this challenge and are ready to step up to it. They look towards the next World Youth Day which will take place in 2011 to help keep them on track. By giving its youth this experience every few years, the Church is doing a lot to maintain the excitement and energy that many are currently lacking in their spiritual lives.

Two Views, Side by Side

Comparing the two different perspectives from which this paper has been formed, there are some very interesting findings which I have come across. Much of the Catholic community see the youth as having a lot of potential, and they are aware that the youth are working towards reaching that potential. There is a belief among many that it is a few key individuals that energize the rest of the group and encourage them to participate. They know that, though the youth work hard, they can do a lot more. Many people worry about the youth's ability to sustain their current level of activity and action. The excitement of things such as World Youth Day energize the youth for a while, but when all of that dies down, no one can ever be sure as to how many will continue to be involved. Despite any negative aspects to the group, the community has a very positive view of the youth, praising them for the work that they do for the community and the support that they provide for each other. Those who are in the position to do so realize that they need to guide and encourage the young people so that they might be able to stay on the right track.

The youth are starting to recognize that they can do a lot, and they have a true desire to learn about their faith and practice it in their lives. They openly desire to lead the Church in the future. They have difficulty organizing and energizing themselves at times, and they recognize this. In a laid back culture, with little respect and support for young people, this is expected and accepted. Many youths are actively working to break these habits, however, and seem to see a lot of value in being active and involved. They are starting to ask for more

from the community, and feel free to ask questions about their faith and are eager to learn. The combination of energy, curiosity, and passion that the group has is a great combination that creates a dynamic environment in which these young people can continue to grow.

Within their community, the youth are seen as moving in the right direction. The youth are calling for more trust and respect from the community. Through continuing to be active in community outreach and service, prayer life, and parish leadership, they will likely earn this respect from a community whom they have already done a lot to impress in a very short period of time.

Responses and Solutions

When comparing the issues that individual youth members brought up to the opinions of other Church members on the same matter, there are definitely a lot of similarities. In fact, every issue that the youth specifically mentioned was also brought up by others who work with the youth. Those who work with the youth were especially in-tune with the issues that the youth face and even mentioned issues such as divorce, violence, and sex, which the youth did not bring up. It is a fact, not an opinion, that these are troubles that the youth deal with. They may have been too self-conscious of to individually mention such touchy subjects, which is to be expected from youths. It is positive to see these similarities and the recognition of the needs of the youth throughout the community.

While recognition of these problems is a start, there remains a serious lack of action when it comes to addressing these problems in real life. There are many possible reasons for this. My discussions were mainly with those who are directly involved with the youth, so other members of the parish may not be as aware of the things that the youth face. This may be one of the reasons for their lack of support. Another reason is that the youth have not called for the church's support. Help generally is not given to those who do not ask for it; it is up to the youth to make their needs known to the community. If they want the church's guidance on certain topics, they need to be bold in asking for it. Those who work with the youth also need to do more as liaisons to the rest of the community. Their voices are more respected in this culture than those of the youth, and they

can be a powerful advocate on behalf of the youth. A final reason for the lack of action may simply be that the clergy and older lay people have forgotten what it is like to be a young; they have forgotten the unique troubles of being young, as well as the unique talents that the youth have. If more people remembered their own youth experiences, I am sure that they would be much more attentive to the needs of their younger community members.

More can be done to bridge the gap between the youth and the rest of the community. The youth can do more to be seen and heard participating in regular church activities. They can also be more active, taking the initiative to seek out aid and put into place the structure that they require. They do have the support of some clergy and some lay people; through everyone working together, the youth can be heard and their issues may be taken more seriously. Those who are not in-tune with the youth currently are not likely to suddenly become interested in the troubles of young people; it is only through the young people making themselves known and positive members of the community that they will win the support of all.

The Real Role of the Youth

There will most likely always be some discrepancy as to the place that the youth have in the Church. From what I found, however, the role of the youth today that will benefit the largest number of people is for these young people to use the gifts that they possess to benefit the entire community. It remains the responsibility of those in positions of power to allow the youth to do this and ensure that they are given the appropriate environment in which they are able to develop and share their gifts. If this sort of environment is created by the Church, the youth will become more involved and engaged, and through their actions they will learn what it takes to be the leaders that they will need to be in the future.

Young people form a significant portion of the population here in Fiji. The traditional culture values respect of elders and authority figures, yet the culture is rapidly changing and more outside influences are making an impact on the younger generations. In the Roman Catholic Church, the youth are struggling to find where they belong in their faith community. The youth group at Sacred Heart Parish has benefited from programs of the Church on a global scale, and they are actively working to stay active and involved. The youth have a lot to give to their community, and they are very willing to share all that they can. Often, their efforts go unnoticed by the Church. Through increased communication, respect, and understanding among all age groups and generations, the youth can and will do a lot to benefit everyone whom they come into contact with.

Source

Knox, Margaret. *The Story of the Catholic Church in Fiji: The First Century: Voyage of Faith.* Archdiocese of Suva, Suva, 1997.

Personal Interviews

Youth Member #1	6/11/08
Youth Member #2	6/11/08
Youth Member #3	6/11/08
Youth Member #4	7/11/08
Youth Member #5	11/11/08
Church Member #1	4/11/08
Church Member #2	4/11/08
Church Member #3	4/11/08
Church Member #4	5/11/08
Church Member #5	5/11/08
Church Member #6	5/11/08
Church Member #7	5/11/08
Church Member #8	7/11/08
Church Member #9	12/11/08
Church Member #10	12/11/08
Church Member #11	12/11/08

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