

# teens and the future

BEING REAL

Teen Life and Christ  
Teens and Spirituality  
Teens and Relationships  
Teens and Morality  
Teens and Society  
Teens and the Future

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JERRY SHEPHERD

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## PREFACE

This book is one in a series of six books about teenagers for teenagers by a non-teenager, so most teenagers will be immediately suspicious of it. After all, many adults talk to teenagers as though they were a foreign species, far beneath the adult's normal sphere of experience. And no one of any age enjoys being talked down to. You can handle a lot of that patronizing when you're a little kid, but the adult pose wears thin as you get older and realize that adults do some pretty stupid and childish things themselves. In fact, the adults who do the dumbest things are often the ones who enjoy lecturing you the most.

I do hope that I'll avoid such talking down in these pages. The fact is, having worked as an educator among teenagers for many years and still having some very clear, often painful memories of my own teen years many eons ago, I really don't feel that superior. I want to talk with you person to person, as an equal, as a friend, as one who has known, respected, and learned from many young people.

But, the teen radar counters, what are you selling? Adults are always trying to get teens to fulfill adult expectations, to conform to what adults propose, to be nice little boys and girls who don't ruffle any feathers. Adults seem to want teens to stay under their thumbs and dependent for as long as possible.

True as this motivation may be in some cases, I hope it's not true for me. Obviously, I have a vision of life that I'm anxious to share with you. My credentials are simply that I have experienced more than most teenagers have just by living longer and that I have had the good fortune to know many teenagers rather well over the years. Such experience doesn't necessarily make me any wiser, but I hope it has given me some perspective on life. It is simply this perspective I want to share with you in these pages. My aim is that you become more

independent and free-spirited. You can buy some or none of what follows. I certainly can't force you. Even if I could, I wouldn't, because then the vision would be of no value to you. You have to decide yourself whether to buy into it.

This book is also suspect because it is about religion and the teenager, and, for many teenagers, it is simply not cool to show interest in organized religion. Though many teens are interested in spiritual matters, they often believe that religion is something that's not quite real. At least, it's not as real as everyday experiences like family, friends, foes, school, parties, love, hate, anger, desire, and frustration. But I have called the series *Being Real* because the main perspective I hope to persuade you to accept is that Catholicism provides the most real understanding and evaluation of our daily experience as teenagers or at any age.

To appreciate this claim, we need the willingness to take a longer view of things. Otherwise, immediate events flood our minds completely. What I mean is this: see if you can now recall the occurrence that seemed the biggest catastrophe in your life, not in the very recent past but within the last year or two. Perhaps you failed an important exam or a course and thus blew a reward your parents had promised you. Or you got grounded for a month for doing something stupid. Maybe you missed an important shot or messed up your solo, ended up with a boring date for the school formal, smashed up the car after spending all your savings on insurance for it, got rejected by a college, or didn't get the job. When such events occur, they seem tragedies whose effects will never be effaced, the most real of real happenings in our lives.

But with time, with perspective, minor tragedies fade from our memories and become potholes in the overall course of our lives. A former student of mine once was grounded for two months and kept from playing on the basketball team because he brought beer to a party. Naturally, as a sixteen-year-old, he thought it was the end of the



world. In his case, the incident also proved to be the spark for a vast improvement in his studies. A year or so later, I reminded him of it. “Gee,” he said, “I’d forgotten all about that.” This kind of standing back from our immediate lives to gain an important sense of perspective and proportion is what I try to help you do throughout this book.

Some of you have experienced tragedy and suffering in your lives on a larger scale than the examples I’ve given, and the vision I share in this book can help you find meaning and companionship in those kinds of tough times. I try in this series to show how the Catholic faith puts teenage life into a perspective that is both realistic and idealistic, one that satisfies the best of our human and spiritual desires and meets our deepest needs. The key to this vision of life is a real person: Jesus Christ. Christian commitment is, finally, a commitment of the heart and mind to Christ, who alone deserves that degree of commitment. We only dare claim that the Church is the most real of realists because the Church is the continuing visible presence of Christ, the most real of people, the pattern and power for all “being real.” And it is Christ, who, despite knowing us through and through, challenges teens today, as he once challenged his followers in Galilee, to become more real.

Allow me to add two practical points. First, many quotations in the text are from the New Testament. I feel that the most effective way of getting to know and love the person of Jesus Christ is through an intelligent reading of the reliable written records of those first Christians who either knew him or knew others who knew him.

If you do not own a copy of the New Testament, I’d encourage you to buy or borrow one so you can see for yourself what it contains. If you are unfamiliar with the way of referring to parts of the New Testament, allow me to explain it briefly. You’ll see in your New Testament that each book is divided into chapters and verses so that each bit of text has its own number. This numbering system was invented so that people using different editions of the New Testament in the

same or different languages could refer easily to the same text. Pages wouldn't work because the same quotation number would appear on different pages in different editions.

The first part of a reference to a particular place in the New Testament names the book because the Bible is really a collection of what were once separate books. The first number after the name refers to the chapter or chapters of the book, and the second number, which follows the colon, refers to the verse or verses. Thus "John 14:16" means that the quotation comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 14, verse 16. "Mark 2:1–12" means that you'll find an example of Christ's claiming the power to forgive sins in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 2, verses 1 through 12. Check out that one now to make sure I haven't made a mistake.

Second, I have generally not quoted other sources in order to avoid clutter and slowing the reader down. But any idea you find valuable or useful in this book is not original; it comes from my study and readings in the Catholic Tradition of the past 2,000 years. That said, whatever you find confusing or "unreal" probably arises from my own limitations of thought and expression.

# INTRODUCTION

Do you ever think about the future? what you'll be doing? what it will be like? Most of the time, we're probably so busy with teen life and its immediate crises—tests to prepare for, friends to care for, events to plan for—that we're focused wholly on the present. But we all dream sometimes—we will go to such and such a school, marry such and such a type of person, live in such and such a place, work at such and such a job, have such and such kids. We all desire control over our lives and hope that all will work out for the best, meaning, usually, according to our plans.

In fact, part of God's will for us is that we prepare and plan for the future as well as we can. By the high school courses we choose, the effort we make, and the grades we get in them now, we are determining to which universities we can reasonably apply. By the way we learn to understand and deal with people now, we are, in part, deciding what social and family life we'll have in the future. By the moral and spiritual habits we develop now, we are determining, in part, what character, reputation, and relationship to God we will have as adults.

But perhaps those categories are not what you think of as “adult”? What does “adult” mean to you? Who are your role models? Where do you find them? Almost any baby or younger kid can serve as an example of what we, as teenagers, have outgrown. But sometimes only a few adults and only certain aspects of adulthood attract us as symbols of the future we face. Early in our teens, we change from kids who admire and rely completely on Mommy and Daddy into increasingly independent beings. We may admire Mom and Dad, or we may judge and criticize them; we may even do both! As we move away from naive hero-worship, we still may love and look up to our parents for their virtues and strengths, or we may focus on their faults and

limitations. We are sure we could manage many things much better than they do. We may be amazed at how uptight they can get over nothing, how unbending on minor issues, how dense about obvious points. We can become skeptical about their use of authority and their decisions, irritated by their criticisms of us, and clever in getting around their rules and regulations.

We tend to be very critical of other adults also, but we do admire those traits in some that reflect our own confused mixture of immature and mature values. We think a friend's father and mother are really cool because they are very loose and undemanding—or do they just not care? We look up to a young man on our block because he makes a lot of money, drives a Mercedes, and has his pick of any girl in town. On the other hand, we'd like to imitate our older sister who has worked hard to become a top professional and has given time and effort to charitable causes. And we can't believe how patient the older couple next door is with our younger brothers, who easily drive us crazy.

We should be smart enough in calm moments to tell good role models from poor ones. We should be fair enough to admit that sometimes we exaggerate in our criticisms of adults and only mouth the clichés of teen culture. But we are not always experienced enough in our teens to make those distinctions. Worse yet, our emotional ups and downs and the pressures of everyday life often confuse us about exactly what we want to be like when we “grow up.”

Still, we share several definite expectations of the future. The prime aspect of adult life that we look forward to is, of course, freedom, independence. For many of us, college studies will include living away from home and having that freedom. Others of us may live at home while studying. Or we might join the work force right away, living at home or in an apartment of our own. In any of these situations, we expect to have more freedom. At the same time, we know college studies and life will be more challenging, and we wonder if we will use our freedom well to meet those tests.

We usually see two other aspects of adulthood, marriage and our career work, as much further off and not quite as desirable. After all, they both impose responsibilities on us and limit our freedom. We imagine we'd like to enjoy our independence a bit before we lose it again. This desire might be even more intense if we think we might have a vocation to celibacy as a priest, religious, or even as a layperson.

A fourth condition of adulthood, even more inevitable than the others, is one that we seldom, if ever, think of as teens: aging and moving towards death. Through our early twenties, everything just seems to be growth. We cannot fathom becoming less vital and up for things, and growing more weary like our parents. Surely, we will not sag suddenly at thirty-five or forty, gradually accumulate assorted aches, pains, and diseases, and steadily go downhill until the end. Yet, both aging, with its physical and psychological complaints, and death, with its apparent finality, will come for us all.

In fact, three things are sure about my future.

First, barring early death, the future *will* happen. Choices I make from now on will shape it for good or ill, as will all my choices from now until death. Life, a friend of mine likes to say, is like a funnel. The further you go along, the fewer the available options. You choose a career and that generally means you can't pursue another at the same time. You choose a spouse and, hopefully, it rules out romance with anyone else.

Second, only three persons know our future with certainty. Not some psychics or palm readers. The Trinity. God knows how our future will go. Through grace, God is trying to guide us in our choices to the best version of ourselves. If we don't respond to those graces, our future will be bleak.

Third, we are meant to reflect the life of the Trinity in our lives. We should relate all these aspects of our future to their supernatural models. We naturally tend to look at things backwards. We say God is our father and think that we are comparing God to human fathers

when, in fact, God's fatherhood is the original and full pattern of all paternity. Similarly, our freedom and knowledge must be a pale but real reflection of the Trinity's fullness of freedom and knowledge; our communion and union in marriage and in society, of their perfect community; our toilsome, tiring work, of their unceasing, creative work; and our aging, sickness, and death, of Christ's redemptive suffering and death.

# THE CRUCIAL TRUTHS FOR LIFE

But before we look ahead, we need to pick out the essential from all that I have discussed in the other books this series. We want to march into the future with our eyes firmly planted on the most important truths. Of all that we could review, I think the following questions are crucial for anyone starting a new phase of life: Why should we love God? How do we love God?

## Why Love God?

Well, why do we love anyone? Why do we love a relative, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a friend? We love others for several reasons.

We love them because they are good people. We are attracted to the goodness in them—their virtues such as sincerity, honesty, affection, love for life, concern for others. We are drawn to different virtues in different people. We love our grandmother because of her simplicity and kindness. We love a friend because of his tough-minded courage or because of her empathy. We love people for some good that is in them.

We love them because they are good to us. They love us back. They share with us what they are and what they have. Our parents give us life itself and nurture us. Friends give us companionship and support, encouragement and an attentive hearing.

We love them because they want the best for us. They purposely help us to be better in some way—as an athlete, a dancer, a student, or a person.

We love them because they sacrifice for us. They do us favors and give us gifts that cost them.

We love them because they love us for who we are. They take our bad with the good, although they may urge us, sometimes even strongly, to improve on some of the bad.

We love others because they are there for us. They don't leave us alone in life's crises.

For these same reasons that we love people, God calls us to love God. In fact, God inspires our love for people, and models it for us within the Trinity's community of love and in Christ made man. Love is all God's idea and God's very life.

We can love God because God is good. From nothing, God has made the entire wondrous universe, from the galaxies to the birds to the atom, and God has created it all and keeps it in existence for us.

We can love God because God loved us first and best. God loved us so much that God created us in God's image and likeness and destined us for happiness and God's friendship. "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15).

We can love God because God wants the absolute best for us. God wants us to share in God's very life. That's what grace is—a share in God's life, an ability to know and love as God does in a limited way now and even more in the next life. Through grace, God makes us God's daughters and sons, God's heirs. "Thus he has given us, through these things, God's precious and very great promises, so that through them you may . . . become participants of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4).

We can love God because God has given of God's self and sacrificed infinitely for us. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
Who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited



but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

(Philippians 2:5–7)

Our Lord tells us, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

We can love God because God loves us for what we are, which God knows better than anyone, as well as for what we can become—which God alone knows. “Just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Ephesians 1:4). “For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:52–53).

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart  
conceived,

What God has prepared for those who love him. (1 Corinthians  
2:9)

We can love God because God is always there for us. If we go to God with real faith and sincerity, God will not fail us. “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Problems?

“But is God people? Is it possible to love someone so distant?”

First, God is the most perfect of people, the model of all conscious and caring life in the universe. God has never been distant from us. In the midst of our being, God preserves us in existence. From within, God prompts us to seek God. In grace, Jesus tells us the Trinity dwells within us. “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). God is at home within us. Seek God there.

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