

teen life  
and christ

BEING REAL

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

# teen life and christ

JERRY SHEPHERD

BEING REAL

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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.

## THE TEEN SCENE

Before we consider what Christianity and Christ might have to say about the real situation of teens, we'd best consider what that situation is, especially at its most challenging, and what conventional human wisdom has to say about it.

Where do you find yourself as a teenager? What is your present situation? Adults often ask, "What's wrong with you?" or "Is anything bothering you?" so there must be some obvious characteristics of the age. In fact, I think it is one of the toughest, if not the toughest, periods of life.

Consider the inner situation. Puberty has struck and, frequently, with a vengeance for a more or less prolonged period. And puberty means a whole string of biological and psychological bombshells, not just the awakening of sexual awareness and instinct. For instance, you may suddenly grow by leaps and bounds. Your body turns awkward, out of control, treacherously clumsy. The curse of acne mars your formerly clear complexion. When you don't shun mirrors, you peer for hours into them, checking out how the battle for your skin is going and trying to see who you really are. You find yourself moody, defensive, uncommunicative, unassured, and prone to anger, frustration, and self-consciousness. The single-minded, if incoherent, energy you possessed as a child degenerates into unpredictable fits and starts. You feel almost as lazy about things you want to do as you feel about things you're asked to do. And all of this hits at the same time that the opposite sex has mysteriously transformed itself from an object of scorn into one of attraction and intrigue for you and your friends. In other words, mind, body, and passions have suddenly taken a quantum leap, and you both look and feel like a new creature. And they ask, "What's wrong with you?"

You get some of this under control as the teen years go on, but external difficulties also increase. In school, teachers suddenly expect you to handle abstract questions that baffle you and make you wonder what ever happened to good old memorization. They still expect you to sit for five hours or more a day in desks you've often outgrown, surrounded by other teens, some of whom you like, love, or admire and others of whom you dislike, detest, or despise. You are forced to study, or to pretend to study, subjects you find boring and useless. You are subjected to the harangues of some teachers you consider idiots or hypocrites. School regulations seem increasingly silly and schooling itself increasingly irrelevant, save, perhaps, as a stepping stone to college or university.

If you're on the college track, the approach of university applications haunts your teachers as well as your parents, relatives, family friends, and even the mailman. You simply must have good grades, good standardized test scores, impressive extracurriculars, and sufficient brownie points for recommendations. Other people do it, why can't you? After all, your entire future and the honor of school and family depend on whether or not you get into the University of Podunk or have to settle for State.

If you're thinking of starting work right after high school, you're questioning your ability to make it in a competitive job market. You're wondering how you can know which line of work will hold your interest for the next forty years. And they ask, "What's wrong with you?"

At home, your parents seem to consider you a young, responsible adult one moment and an overgrown sixth grader the next, depending on whether they want you to run an errand in the car or to get home by ten on a Saturday night. They come home from a movie, giggling uncontrollably, and tell you how funny it was. You ask to go to the same movie with friends the next weekend, and they get serious and won't let you go because it's suddenly become "too trashy." You seem endlessly hassled about when to get up and go to bed, order in your

room, jobs to be done, examples to set, family trips to be taken to grandmother's, and family excursions on which you'd rather be dead than seen by acquaintances. You can't so much as take a sip of beer or a drag on a cigarette, use a single curse word, or hold hands with a member of the opposite sex within a ten-mile radius of home. Your parents, unbelievably, will get all worked up about the most trivial things: how you cut your hair, what clothes you wear, whom you go out with, what music you listen to, whose house you'll be at first, then second. They require a schedule more detailed than Amtrak's before you can open the front door. What's there to be so worked up about?

You can be grounded for bad grades, bad attitudes, bad manners, bad home-chore performance, or for letting frustrations show, trying to kill your younger brother—who clearly deserves it, or cutting down your younger sister—who needs it. You may be punished for telling the truth or for hiding it. And, of course, you have to work summers, vacations, and often during the schoolyear at such glamour jobs as stock person at the local supermarket or at McDonald's. A job, of course, is a way to get out of the house and to build up some independent source of spending money, and, for these reasons, you may actually have suggested and even fought for the job. Still, you're often working with idiots and demeaned in public, and your parents are always bugging you about getting homework done and about the portion of your pay they're putting away for you. And they ask, "What's wrong with you?"

## Strategies

Faced with such complexities, many teenagers transform themselves into junior professional people. You become a lawyer who debates the fine points of home rule and tries to sway opinion by citing precedent, previous rulings, and the example of other home-rule states. In such a role, you can remember promises made a year ago, argue persuasively from a dozen different viewpoints, and even, if pressed, quote the Scriptures or other expert witnesses.

You also become an accomplished actor, capable of assuming various necessary masks at will. At one moment, you are a wounded innocent unjustly accused; at another, a tragic hero or heroine wrongfully denied basic rights; at a third, a hounded servant driven mad; at a fourth, a humble suppliant to the lord or lady of the house. As with any actor or actress, you also become a dedicated student of adult human nature. By careful observation, eavesdropping, and repeated experiment, you know exactly what timing, tone, emphasis, and mask are necessary to save your hide, win sympathy, gain a privilege, or redirect wrath.

With such knowledge, you can also become a master strategist whose basic principles are “drive them to the brink but no further” and “divide and conquer.” Thus, you develop a delicate touch in pushing teachers or parents to their limits. You know you can go to just this point in distracting them from their purpose of controlling you before they break. Sometimes, you push them over just for the fun of it, because you’ve developed a mean streak too. Similarly, you learn how to play off one adult against another. If you can convince your mother that your grades are the result of bad teaching, she’ll be on your teacher’s case instead of yours. If you know that your mother will oppose your staying at a particular friend’s house for the weekend, but that you can charm permission out of your dad, then you can sit back and let the two of them fight it out. Better yet, you’ll be out the door while they are fighting about it.

Now, the average adult may say that what you’ve really become in these moments is a liar, sneak, con artist, and Lord knows what else. At times, you feel a twinge of conscience over some of your stratagems and performances. Yet they usually seem necessary for preserving the greater independence you feel and claim. For you to do all the things you want and think you have a right to do now, you must occasionally misrepresent your true purposes, plans, and actions. And if you don’t want to have your true freedom of movement curtailed by too much homework, detention, or grounding, then you sometimes have to

cover up and fake it. After all, you'll be off on your own in college and making your own daily decisions very shortly anyway. So what's the big deal if you finagle some for now?

## Keeping Things in Focus

The aforementioned is what goes through some teenagers' minds all the time and through almost all teenagers' minds part of the time. For some, perhaps, it may seem the complete summary of their lives and, for a few, a total exaggeration. But for most, it will represent the worst scenario, the downside of teen life—real enough but not the whole story. As teenagers, we normally can put things partially in perspective and see another person's point of view, even that of a teacher or a parent. You are sometimes aware you're exaggerating, overreacting, or in the wrong. Down deep, you may know that an adult is right about avoiding a certain event or person.

But a balanced perspective is difficult for anyone to come by when they're in the midst of a situation. Right after losing a particularly tight game, you find little comfort in the fact that you played your best or that you'll forget all about it in a few days. When a close relative or friend dies, you mourn even if you know and believe that the person has immortal life with God. The loss of the person's companionship weighs too heavily at first to evaporate before his or her good fortune at being with God.

Still, I'll risk stepping on your emotional toes by recalling some obvious, reasonable perspectives on the terrible teens. First, the teens are a common, objective stage in human development. Maybe you caught that TV documentary a few years ago that featured interviews with a fairly large and varied group of people at the ages of seven, fourteen, twenty-one, and twenty-eight. If you did, I think you'd agree that all of them seemed unattractive and unhappy when they were fourteen. You'd think that these alternately withdrawn and belligerent, introspective and angry, uncertain and defiant, teens could never

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