

teens and spirituality

BEING REAL

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

teens and spirituality

JERRY SHEPHERD

BEING REAL

Saint Mary's Press™



Genuine recycled paper with 10% post-consumer waste.
Printed with soy-based ink. 5091700

Nihil Obstat Rev. Michael J. K. Fuller, STL
Censor Deputatus
November 1, 2004

Imprimatur: †Most Rev. Raymond E. Goedert, MA, STL, JCL
Vicar General
Archdiocese of Chicago
November 2, 2004

The nihil obstat and imprimatur are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error. No implication is contained therein that those who have granted the nihil obstat or imprimatur agree with the contents, opinions, or statements expressed, nor do they assume any legal responsibility associated with publication.

The publishing team included Lorraine Kilmartin, development editor; Mary M. Bambenek, development administrator; Mary Koehler, permissions editor; Lynn Riska, typesetter; Kimberly K. Sonnek, designer; Getty Images, cover photo; manufacturing coordinated by the production services department of Saint Mary's Press.

Copyright © 2005 by Jerry Shepherd. Originally published by Little Hills Press Pty Ltd., Sydney, Australia. Published in the United States by Saint Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publications, 702 Terrace Heights, Winona MN 55987-1318, www.smp.org. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced by any means without the written permission of Saint Mary's Press.

Printed in the United States of America

Printing: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Year: 2013 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05

ISBN 0-88489-838-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shepherd, Jerry, 1949—

Teens and spirituality / Jerry Shepherd.

p. cm.— (Being real)

ISBN 0-88489-838-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Catholic youth—Religious life. 2. Spirituality—Catholic Church.
3. Catholic Church—Doctrines. I. Title. II. Series: Shepherd, Jerry, 1949—
Being real.

BX2355.S546 2005

248.8'3'088282—dc22

2004018468

CONTENTS

Preface 7

Introduction 11

Catch the Spirit! 11

Our Real Spiritual Situation 15

The Myth of Self-Sufficiency 15

Innocence Lost . . . 19

God's Response to Us 22

God: Gift Giver Supreme 22

Innocence Restored! 24

Amazing Grace! 27

Real Life 31

The Gift of Forgiveness 35

Up-to-the-Minute Graces 37

Why We Should Respond to God 40

Gratitude 40

Humble Beginnings 44

Responsible Christians 46

Perseverance 48

The Spiritual Struggle 51

How We Can Respond to God 55

Spiritual Practices 55

Planning for Life 58

Habits of Love 60

Loving Through the Day 64

Mary, Our Mother 66

The Cross and Glory 67

Acknowledgments 71

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

Catch the Spirit!

Do you ever feel like you're six or seven different people? There's the studious you who more or less pays attention in class and does homework more or less conscientiously. There's the crazy you who gyrates wildly at dances and goes nuts at concerts. There's the rough you who plays sports and doesn't back down from challenges. There's the tender you who can be oh-so-gentle and affectionate with a special friend. There's the quiet, moody you on some family occasions. . . .

Sure, we should behave differently in different situations. But is there a real you underlying all those roles, any thread connecting those various activities? Do you sometimes despair of "finding yourself," your true identity, with so many contrary impulses zipping through your head? For example, try writing down right now all the things you were thinking about for the three hours before you sat down to read. Probably you'll discover, if you can remember at all, a wild assortment of different desires, judgments, and intentions. I'm sure you'll discover many good things: deciding to do someone a favor, hoping you can do well in the game this afternoon, complimenting someone on new clothes. But if you're honest, you'll probably also discover some mean-spirited items: deciding to mock so-and-so, heeding the temptation to fantasize about someone else in a sexual way or yourself in a self-centered way, determining the right lie to tell to keep you out of trouble at school or at home. What do you focus on, if anything? Do you deliberately avoid seriously reflecting on what you're doing so you don't have to undergo painful change?

In the seventeenth century, the French philosopher Blaise Pascal claimed that many people avoid the question of the purpose of their

lives by giving themselves up to ceaseless external activity. Can't think now—gotta get to class, gotta get to practice, gotta call my friends, gotta catch that show! In America, in the nineteenth century, Thoreau said something similar: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (*Walden and Civil Disobedience*, p. 5). Are we just hanging out, hiding out in life? Do we find that certain activities that do not require much mind power—watching TV, hanging out online, playing video games—absorb us? Do we think that real thinking, real focus, requires too much effort? Are we playing at life? My spirit, that is, my inner life or consciousness, can be disjointed, chaotic, superficial—like a cubist portrait or a scatter pattern. My spirit can be so purposely dulled that I go through life mindlessly, responding to whatever happens unreflectively, like an animal, like a dumb bunny. My spirit no longer controls my actions; they just happen instinctively depending on my mood.

We can become chameleons instead of persons, changing colors to fit the moment's environment and to avoid standing out. These people like to hassle little kids, so I do too. Those other people think doing well in school is dumb, so I do too. This group is racist, so I am too. That other group is gossipy, so I am too. I'm red with one set of friends, blue with another, and green with a third. See? Our identity can become . . . whatever other people and events want it to become.

As we settle into the new millennium, many seem discontented with widespread materialism, consumerism, self-absorption and the lack of real spiritual or community life. True, many try to find solace in the latest trend—astrology, Feng Shui, Tarot cards, crystals, out-of-body-experiences, even angels. All of those, of course, are themselves commercialized. Although there are elements of truth in some of those trends, many of them do not require much of a change of heart or long-term commitment. Still, many people are sincerely searching for the spiritual, showing renewed interest in more traditional religious practices.

Christ remains the key. He is the core answer to “who I am” and “what I can become.” Sure, you’ll probably flounder a bit longer before you find your career and feel totally at ease socially. Your plans and situations may change a dozen times before you “settle down.” But, in Christ, you will find the thread that always connects all the different pieces of your life. “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Christian living means that we allow the Spirit of Christ to unify and transform our inner spirit so that we can follow Christ and be united with him. It means that we seek this spirit by reflecting on the model of Christ and by using practical exercises that he has inspired—mental prayer, examination of conscience, spiritual direction, and the like. The Spirit of Christ not only gives purpose to our whole life but also gives unity to our everyday lives, just as school spirit at a rally shows and generates unity—at least, if it’s not too embarrassing.

Christ’s Spirit—the Holy Spirit whom he promises to send—allows us to see and to experience that God, our loving Father, is always near us, that we can show our love for God and union with God simply by fulfilling our various work, study, social, family, civic, and recreational commitments in a conscientious way. The Christian life should never be dull. All our daily, life-affirming actions may be accompanied with prayer in God’s service and offered to God by way of the cross for our concerns. Our days are adventures in which we, the hero or heroine, work for the good against what is life-destroying—the evil within us and outside of us—or, we, the villain, spread destruction and evil or let it spread.

This book assumes you agree that we must become more Christian, more Christlike, more fully conformed to Christ, so that we can become most truly ourselves and fulfill our potential most completely and ultimately be happy in heaven. This is what we mean by “being

real”: being our truest and best selves. It assumes we agree that becoming other Christs, Christ himself, as Saint Paul suggests, is our goal and that we must now discover how we can reach that goal. (If you do not agree, you might check out another book in this series, *Teen Life and Christ*.) We must decide what attitudes and practices we require. Otherwise, we will be like the unwise builder in Christ’s parable, who did not calculate cost in advance and produced only those dreary abandoned foundations we can still see on city blocks today.

OUR REAL SPIRITUAL SITUATION

Allow me to summarize a few points from another book of this series, *Teen Life and Christ*. First, as teens, we're old enough to have to take Christ seriously—because he takes us very seriously. Second, taking him seriously includes an effort to know and to follow him. He requires that we live a morality that conflicts in many ways with the morality our society practices. He requires that we pray, choose acts of service over our own wants, and show our love through generous action. Third, we must make a deep and true commitment to those truths if we are to have any fighting chance of living them. To recognize the call of Christ is not enough. We must want to respond to it, not just with our emotions but with our whole being.

But there are two problems with trying to live according to those ideals. First, our own limitations of mind and heart make it impossible for us. Second, even if we were perfect human beings, we still couldn't do it! Let's think about each point slowly, for they tell us about our real situation. If we ignore them in trying to live the spirit of Christ, we'll never be able to do it.

The Myth of Self-Sufficiency

As teenagers, we want to be treated as responsible young adults. We mightily resent being treated or thought of as kids. "Mother, I'm not a child" has probably escaped our lips or been in our hearts more than once. Yet in the Gospels, Christ keeps calling his true disciples "little children." In Mark's Gospel, for example, he makes childlikeness a condition for salvation. "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15). Why does Christ say that we must be as children before God?

Because we are. In fact, we're babies before God. Think of your own real experience of baby brothers or sisters or those of friends. Their neediness is the most obvious fact about them because we constantly have to respond to it. They need everything to live. They can't feed themselves, dress themselves, clean themselves, or even move themselves without our aid. Older children can get along without us, can reject our advice or authority, can bug us, complain about us, and report on us. Babies can't.

We all once needed others to keep us alive physically. As we develop, we become more and more independent until we are able to function on our own. People with disabilities seek out the external supports, such as motorized wheelchairs or specialized computer equipment, that will help them achieve the highest degree of autonomy their situation allows. In fact, not to develop this autonomy is to retard our maturing. We are proud of our independent achievements. And yet, even humanly, we remain extremely dependent.

In our teenage years, we pretend to think that we're immortal; nothing can stop us. But, in fact, disease easily saps our vitality and endurance. Recently, I heard that a giant young man, who pumped iron regularly and worked successfully as a bouncer in rowdy college bars, had suddenly been laid out by a burst appendix. He could barely move, and all the energy seemed drained from his strong young body. "I never realized how fragile I really am," he remarked.

We don't need anything quite so drastic to convince us of our physical limitations. Just recall the last heavy flu you had, how lifeless, aching, and listless your body felt, how foggy and wandering your mind was, how depressed your feelings were. Even when you wanted to put a good face on your sufferings, you often just didn't have the willpower.

You're not alone. Look at poor Peter, the first Pope, the rock of Christ's Church, during the Last Supper. He sincerely insists that he is fully committed to Christ. But he said vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all of them said the same"

(Mark 14:31). Yet a short time later, he falls asleep three times as Christ goes through his agony, despite the Master's request that he simply keep watch. "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak," comments our Lord (Mark 14:38).

Indeed, our weak wills often fail to overcome the tug of the flesh. Consider again how frequently we have resolved to do better in studies or sports or in keeping our room neat or in dealing with people, only to falter and fall back into old, bad habits after a very short time. Even people of great determination can commonly focus it on only a few things, the most energetic of them often failing to attain most of their proposed goals. The myth of our self-sufficiency and the actual fact of our childlike limitations before the universe are clear upon the briefest reflection. Nor does the situation change simply because we get older. I recall hearing a story of an old priest who was asked what he had learned of human nature from the thousands of confessions he had heard. The priest's response was quick: "There are no grown-ups."

But even if we were perfect human beings, our nature, like a leash on a dog, would still severely curb us. We are not our own masters, we are not our own creators, we are not our own preservers. We cannot will ourselves beyond the boundaries of human mortality and human nature. We grow proud if we manage to excel at one or two things: at studying, competing in sports, playing a musical instrument, playing video games, snowboarding, woodcrafting, or comic book collecting. Yet so restricted are we that the brightest and most accomplished of us are totally ignorant of and unskilled at vast ranges of merely human knowledge and endeavor. Were not so much of our physical nature automatic, if we had to will each breath, each heartbeat, each chemical reaction of the body, we could not concentrate on anything else and would die within seconds anyway.

As things stand, at one and the same time, we can't be in two places, do two things well, or think two different thoughts. Every decision we make excludes all the other possible choices. Boys can't

take both Sarah and Linda to the prom (at least not without causing real problems for themselves). Girls can't wear two of their new formals to the same homecoming dance. We can't go to a concert and a party that take place simultaneously in different cities. If we choose one college, then we exclude all the other colleges. If the Bulls are our team, we can't logically cheer for the Knicks against them.

To put it another way, living with the Holy Spirit takes more than clear understanding, an open heart, and dogged determination. Granted, those qualities will take us far in human quests. If you're running the mile, a knowledge of conditioning and strategy and a committed, grit-my-teeth-and-run-'til-I-drop desire may well win the race after several laps. But you'll end up in the same place you began. In the spiritual life, we want to get somewhere—our ideal of Christ—that requires us to fly a great distance, still pumping our legs or flapping our arms perhaps, but being carried. We are attempting something beyond our nature, something supernatural. Our natural qualities of mind and will take us only so far. Relying on them alone, we soon hit the wall in the spiritual life.

In fact, Christ tells us straight, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Nothing. "But," we respond, "not really nothing—look at my grades, my athletic trophies, my Scouting awards, my" Nothing, says our Lord—nothing that can contribute to the growth of my spirit in you. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). He wants us not merely to fly spiritually but to soar like those jets that scratch the heavens. But we can't even get off the ground! Nor is the problem exactly new. Saint Paul tells the Corinthian converts that "it is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans" (1 Corinthians 5:1). They couldn't follow Christ even with Saint Paul as their teacher.

In our real neediness and poverty, then, both as limited, non-necessary beings in the universe and as Christians called to follow the God-man, we are like children before God. What are we with our slow

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All scriptural quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Catholic Edition (NRSV). Copyright © 1993 and 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved.

All quotations marked *Catechism* are from the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for use in the United States of America. Copyright © 1994 by the United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used with permission.

The quotation on page 12 is from *Walden and Civil Disobedience: Authoritative Texts Background Reviews and Essays in Criticism*, by Henry David Thoreau, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1966), page 5. Copyright © 1966 by W. W. Norton and Company.

The quotation on page 33 is from *Patrology Volume One: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature*, by Johannes Quasten (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1950), page 66.

The quotation on page 66 is from John Paul II's apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, number 14, at www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20021016_rosarium-virginis-mariae_en.html, accessed August 17, 2004.

To view copyright terms and conditions for Internet materials cited here, log on to the home pages for the referenced Web sites.

During this book's preparation, all citations, facts, figures, names, addresses, telephone numbers, Internet URLs, and other pieces of information cited within were verified for accuracy. The authors and Saint Mary's Press staff have made every attempt to reference current and valid sources, but we cannot guarantee the content of any source, and we are not responsible for any changes that may have occurred

since our verification. If you find an error in, or have a question or concern about, any of the information or sources listed within, please contact Saint Mary's Press.

Endnotes Cited in Quotations
from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

1. St. Anthonasium *De inc.*, 54, 3: PG 25, 192B
2. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opusc.* 57: 1–4.