

# teens and society

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

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.

# INTRODUCTION

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main” (John Donne, Meditation XVII, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p. 795). So wrote John Donne in a famous sermon. When we’re younger, we may have moments in which we feel we can go it alone in the spirit of a song of my own youth: “I am a rock, I am an island.” But mostly we’re in the mode of another sixties’ song: “All You Need Is Love.” We live in a world shared by others. We depend on others and they depend on us. We influence them. They influence us. We need them. They need us. We have talked about these facts with regard to our interpersonal relationships in another book in this series, *Teens and Relationships*. Here we want to focus more on society as a whole and our place in it.

A chief way that we are defined by society and contribute to it is through our work. One of the first questions adults ask of a new acquaintance is “What do you do for a living?” Among younger people, the question is “Where do you go to school?” and, for college students, “What’s your major?” ‘Student,’ as we shall see in the first section of this book, “Studies and Work,” is a special and privileged category in our society.

Culture, as an expression of a particular society, influences us tremendously, like a kind of second skin. In “Four Cultures,” I suggest that it consists of everything, material and spiritual, that expresses our society’s beliefs about life and living—or pretends to express them. As morally free agents, we need to embrace some aspects of our culture but reject others. As Christians, we can influence culture to become more Christlike and more truly human.

All members of society have responsibilities in justice and charity toward the others in their country and in the world. These we explore

in the “On Social Concern” section. Vatican II and recent Popes have told us that it is particularly the job of the Church’s laity to put the principles of Catholic social doctrine into practice. We will discuss the principles and how teenagers might practice them in their apparently limited situations.

Finally, as Christians in an increasingly de-Christianized world, we have both the chance and duty to explain the doctrine of Christ to others clearly and convincingly. Often, we are not able to do so until we first help people grasp some preliminary truths, such as the existence of God and the historical reliability of the Gospels. This whole effort to explain our faith comes under the branch of theology called apologetics. In the “Apologetics” section of this book, we briefly consider the why, how, and what of apologetics, which has also become largely the duty of the laity—that is, those in the Church who are not ordained ministers. Apologetics is especially important for teens, who often have contact with many more peers than adults do. Allow me, at this point, to offer some resources you might like to read yourself: Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith: Essays in Christian Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988); C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952); and F. J. Sheed, *Theology for Beginners* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1981).

But what is the Christian’s role in society? “The Epistle of Diognetus,” a document from the early Christian centuries, expands our Lord’s saying that we must be both completely in the world but not of the world. The following summary from that document explains further:

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by either country, speech, or customs. . . . Yet while they settle in both Greek and non-Greek cities, as each one’s lot is cast, and conform to the customs of the country in dress, diet, and mode of life in general, the whole tenor of their living stamps it as worthy of admiration and admittedly contrary to expectation. . . . They marry like all others and beget children; but they do not expose their offspring. [Some ancient peoples would rid themselves of

unwanted babies by leaving them unprotected in the wild.] Their board they spread for all, but not their bed. They find themselves in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They spend their days on earth, but hold citizenship in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their private lives go beyond the laws. . . .

To say it briefly: what the soul is in the body, that the Christians are in the world. The soul is spread through all the members of the body, and the Christians throughout the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, but is not part and parcel of the body; so Christians dwell in the world, but are not part and parcel of the world. . . . The flesh, though not at all wronged by the soul, yet hates and makes war on it, because it is hindered from indulging its passions; so, too, the world, though not at all wronged by the Christians, hates them because they oppose its pleasures. . . . Christians love those that hate them, . . . [and yet] are the very ones who hold the world together. . . . Such is the important post to which God has assigned them, and it is not lawful for them to desert it now. (Adapted, in Quasten, *Patrology*: vol. 1, pp. 250–251)

Saint Augustine compares the earthly city that man builds by himself with the city that he can build with God's help:

Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God even to the contempt of self. The former . . . glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, "Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head." In the one, the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love, the latter obeying,

while the former take thought for all. (*The City of God*, p. XIV, pp. 410–411)

And John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*) tells us that we are called to construct a civilization of love. One model of such a society, the Pope says, is Saint Paul’s famous hymn to love:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)

We cannot, then, go merrily along, uncritically digesting every tidbit society throws our way. As we see in the *Teens and Morality* book in this series, we must judge our society according to a Christian conscience. Saint Paul warns us that we’ll have to draw uncrossable lines and go against the current at least sometimes: “But test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21–22).

Yet, Christianity is not primarily a negative approach to life. Our mission is to bring positive Christian values into our society through our example, talk, and activity as workers and citizens of that society. We must do our part to change the world into a civilization of love. Please don’t think: “I’m too young—that’s a job for adults who have some clout.” For one thing, unless we develop clear Christian ideas and healthy habits regarding our role in society now, we won’t have them when we’re older. Even more to the point, we can always have a definite impact on our teen society right now, trying to make it more of a civilization of love.

# STUDIES AND WORK

How do we contribute to society as students? Economically, we don't. Students produce absolutely nothing of economic value through their studies. Yet, for the first time in history, it is now possible for almost anyone to spend most of his or her teen years in study rather than in economically productive work. Why? To prepare us to take up a socially productive role. Society expects that the more completely trained we are, the better we will contribute to the common good of society as both workers and citizens.

This is not the outlook of most high school students. Most see (or pretend to see) studies as a terrible burden that a conspiracy of parents and teachers' unions has inflicted on them. Many can't wait to get to college—not so they can engage in deeper, more focused study—but so they can party unhindered by adults.

To positively affect our society, though, we must first gain the respect of others as responsible members of that society. As we become older, this respect becomes more and more based on our abilities, character, and achievement as workers. In fact, to contribute effectively to our society, we must become good Christian learners and workers. So, let's try to understand both the human and Christian value of our work now and in the future.

## Reasons for Working

*Dobie Gillis* was a popular TV program for teenagers in the early sixties. Bob Denver, whom you may know as Gilligan, played the show's clown, whose most famous bit was the fit of near hysteria he would go into whenever he heard the word *work*. His reaction was

obviously exaggerated, yet many parents claimed to see their own teenage son or daughter in Denver's character. Even when I was young, it seems, teenagers had a bad reputation as students and workers.

The various growth spurts of puberty can make teens sluggish. But we can't blame it all on hormones, because laziness is part of our fallen human nature. We all tend to follow the path of least resistance. Remaining draped inertly across our beds or letting our imaginations wander aimlessly is much easier than cutting the lawn or writing a term paper.

Peer pressure often increases our natural laziness, especially in studies. In some places, doing well in school is just not cool. It's for losers and zeros. A concerned inner city mother once lamented to me that she made her son sit down until he had finished his homework each night and made sure he had it with him in the morning. But each day he would "lose" it on the way to school for fear his friends would mock him.

If we regularly give in to comfort and outside pressure, we will never accomplish anything that costs an effort. Now, at the beginning of our maturity, we must start to develop the internal and external self-discipline needed to achieve good goals. Teens can work hard when they want to. Many parents are amazed at the reports they get of their sons and daughters at outside jobs. It's as though two entirely different people were working at McDonalds and at home. Parents are tempted to hire this other person but don't think they could afford him or her.

"Are questions allowed?"

Of course.

"OK, what do you call good goals? Sure, I'll work hard at McDonalds. There I'm making hard cash and can spend some of it on clothes, CDs, concerts and other things I want. But everything they want me to do in school is boring. It has nothing to do with real life. How can I get excited about quadratic equations when I'll never use them again? Why learn German when I'll never go to Germany and



don't really care about it? Why study history, which is about a lot of dead people anyway?

Work, especially study, is difficult and doesn't always give an immediate payoff. We need long-term convictions, goals, or ideals to push us to overcome laziness and external pressures. Parents, teachers, and advisers suggest many sensible ideas about study, but teens must take those ideas largely on faith, because we haven't experienced all that our parents have. Let me review some of the most common human reasons for studying hard in high school.

What we really learn in high school is not so much the content of courses but good habits of thinking and working. The various courses force us to improve our abilities to memorize, define, analyze, compare and contrast, synthesize, argue, and persuade. Even if we never take another math course, the kinds of logical skills we learn from mastering quadratic equations as best we can will stay with us and be of use throughout our lives. If we have learned how to learn in high school, we will be life-long learners, workers who can grasp new material and use it creatively and productively in any field.

Of course, subject content may count much more for us in the future than we imagine now. For example, we will find preparation for medical school in college difficult if we don't have a good high school grounding in the sciences. Or we may discover that we love a particular field, say engineering, but are unprepared for it because we did not learn the basics of high school math. We may finally become engineers only to discover that we'd be much better ones if we could communicate our ideas and plans better—but we never did pay much attention to high school English and debating. In fact, all college courses, even those most new to us, will build on ideas and skills we should have mastered before.

Like most other undertakings, studies also become more enjoyable the more we put ourselves into them. If you have ever water-skied, you know how frustrating it can be at first. You sit back in the water as you are told to, and suddenly you're yanked up . . . and

down, falling to the left, to the right, backwards, end over end, in every possible posture except upright, time after time after time. But, if you keep at it until you master it, what a great experience! Once we get the basics of any discipline down, even math or literature, we tend to delight in our hard-won knowledge and skills.

For some students, simply the challenge of undertaking a difficult subject and prevailing is enough to keep them studying through high school. They will not let up because they are as self-disciplined, confident, and capable as athletes are in their sports. Or they simply have too much self-respect to allow any subject or teacher to overcome them. Many students in Catholic schools also realize the sacrifices that parents and others make to pay their tuition. And public school education costs money too—it's paid for by local taxpayers. Hard work becomes a matter of justice, a way of paying back what is owed. Still other students work hard simply to make someone they love and admire—a parent, relative, boyfriend, or girlfriend—proud of them. Some idealists want to learn all they can in certain areas, say the sciences, so they can help others later as doctors or researchers. And, of course, the realists want good grades to get into a good college to get a good job later.

## Studiosness and the Pursuit of Excellence

Two natural drives, the desire for knowledge and the desire for achievement, should help us in our work, but we need to channel them properly through the virtue of temperance. We all want to know things. Someone has a secret, a funny story, or a juicy rumor, and we must hear it. We glimpse a startling image on a reality show as we flip channels and feel compelled to watch more. We hear unusual noises in the street and can't resist sneaking a look. We bury ourselves in a book on the subway but can't avoid eavesdropping on our neighbors' conversation. None of these lures may be of the slightest personal concern to us, but our attention still gets riveted to them. So strong is

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The quotation on pages 49–50 is from John Paul II's *On the One Hundredth Anniversary (Centesimus Annus)* on the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, number 47, at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html), accessed August 30, 2004.

The quotation by Pope John Paul XXIII on page 57 is from his encyclical *Mother and Teacher (Mater et Magistra)*, number 20, at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jxxiii\\_enc\\_15051961\\_mater\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jxxiii_enc_15051961_mater_en.html), accessed August 30, 2004.

The list of violations of people's rights from the Vatican II on pages 65 is from *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, number 297, at [www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html), accessed August 30, 2004.

The quotation by Pope John Paul II on page 66 is from *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae)*, number 9, at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html), accessed August 30, 2004.

The quotation on pages 69–70 is from “Economic Justice for All,” a pastoral letter on Catholic social teaching and the U.S. economy, by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, number 16, at [www.osjspm.org/cst/eja.htm](http://www.osjspm.org/cst/eja.htm), accessed August 30, 2004.

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

1. *Didache* 2, 2: SCh 248, 148; cf. *Ep. Barnabae* 19, 5: Patrologia Graeca 2, 777; *Ad Diognetum* 5, 6: Patrologia Graeca 2, 1173; Terullian, *Apol.* 9: Patrologia Latina 1, 319–320.
2. *Dei Verbum* 19; cf. *Acts* 1:1–2.