

teens and relationships

BEING REAL

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

teens and relationships

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

Relating

What is most important to the average teen? Where does most of your active concern and energy go? What do you think most about? Clothes? Music? Money? Sports? Studies? Any of these might be uppermost for an individual teen. But my guess is that relations with others rank high on most teens' lists.

Our relationships are among the most defining things about us. We are sons, daughters, nephews, nieces, and cousins. We are classmates, coworkers, lab partners, and teammates. We are acquaintances and antagonists, friends and enemies. We are customers, clients, patients, patrons, spectators, fans, listeners, viewers, students, tutors, employees, and beneficiaries, to name but a few.

People who never think about their relationships become self-centered and shallow. They tend to take others for granted. People who think too much about their relationships become self-centered and complicated. They often look for an impossible perfection in a relationship and don't make allowances for the limitations we all have.

For married adults, relationships with family members are important. For the teen, family relationships are important, but peer relationships of various kinds are even more so. Any of our relationships—whether with family, friends, acquaintances, or even strangers—can be a major source of joy and hope in life. They can also be a major source of sorrow and despair. They can boost us or they can bury us. They can help us grow and evolve as people, or they can shrink and decay us.

Relations, said the novelist Henry James, really end nowhere. The fruit or rot that comes from our relationships will affect our future relationships and those of all we touch. And, in turn, these others will spread health or disease.

What will determine whether our relationships have positive or negative effects? Several things, I think. Who and what we think other people are. Who and what we think we are. Our expectations of what we get and what we give in relationships. Our virtues and vices.

As with everything else, the most important factor will be whether we learn from Christ about relationships or just pick up the claptrap of our society. The “world” tells us many lies about relationship: That they are necessarily short-lived. That to get ahead we need to use others. That romance and love is mostly sex. That loyalty is out of date. That efficiency and progress and success, that things, are more important than people.

If Christ shows us what being human really means, then to be real, we must see relationships as he does. We must count on God’s help and also keep making the effort to live up to that vision.

One thing from the New Testament is clear: how we see relations with other persons is crucial to our happiness. We tend to seek happiness in two ways: the way of self and the way of others, the way of getting and the way of giving. In the first, pride leads us to seek happiness by piling up pleasures, including whatever pleasures we can get from others, purely for ourselves. We are like the wretched man in Christ’s parable who focused all his efforts on getting his grain in storage only to hear God’s judgment: “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Luke 12: 20). In his self-absorption he forgot that he wouldn’t live forever. And we forget that God, not us, is the center of the universe.

The second way, Christ tells us, and the only way we will find our own self-fulfillment, is by forgetting about ourselves and giving ourselves to others:

“Rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. . . . But I am among you as one who serves.” (Luke 22: 26–27). “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (John 12:24–25).

To be happy, we must recognize that we are incomplete by ourselves and that we only become complete when we give ourselves in love to others and when we realize that we will only be complete when we love God who has loved us first. Our ultimate happiness is to be in direct relation with the three persons in one God whose own relations of love are the models for all earthly relationships.

This book has four chapters. First, in “Teens and Others,” we discuss our experience of relations with others in general and what Christ teaches us about those relationships. Next, in “Friendship,” we talk about our special relationships from a human and a Christian point of view. Third, we explore the meaning and practice of “Friendship with Christ.” Finally, we think about how to be a “Teenage Ambassador” who passes on to others Christ’s teaching and example by way of real friendship. I hope these considerations help you to be a better friend and, especially, a closer friend of Christ.

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