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James Riordan, S.J.

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THE HEART OF A GENERATION

James Riordan, S.J.

I spent my second year of novitiate as a part-time campus minister and adjunct professor at the University of Detroit Mercy. During the year, our university ministry staff spent time prayerfully reflecting upon *Generation Y* and how we can best serve them. These discussions bred more questions than answers, but ultimately left me considering how we can minister to young people.

During the spring term university ministry offers a retreat. Students who had originally signed up for the retreat called and told us they would not be able to attend because they had overbooked themselves and were not able to get out of their other commitments; our retreat was last on their list of priorities. My colleague, with a bit of exasperation in his voice, remarked, "Young people today are walking around with huge heads and underdeveloped hearts." I find this insight a particularly appropriate way to understand this generation of young people: they are masters at multi-tasking and work hard to achieve whatever goal they set out to accomplish. But often, care of their hearts is last on their priority list.

Young people appear overwhelmed by schedules, academic commitments, and long-term goals. Communication of information is fast, digital, and part of the multi-task mindset of a young adult. They have expectations that class material can be easily found and digested from Wikipedia or a simple Google search. The development of friendship and intimacy can be as quick and distant as the text messages they send. I sense a rapid, schizophrenic pace in the lives of young people.

I had a very bright young man in my Christian Ethics class who wrote wonderful essays and seemed to grasp our Catholic relationship between divine grace and sin. In great detail he acknowledged both the pathos of sin and the need we have to allow Jesus to enter into our sin to apply his healing salve. One day we took a walk after class, and this young man told me about a personal dilemma he was going through. He spoke to me about all his confusion, guilt, and fear. He repeated again and again how he felt gripped by his sin and yet could not let go. This bright young man was not able to cope with the chaos within his scheduled life. I believe he came to me, not looking for a therapist or a the-

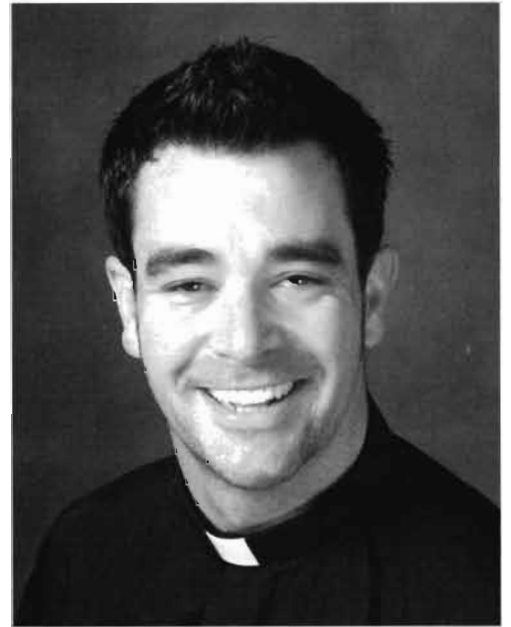
ology teacher, but rather as one who would urge him to ask Jesus to be with him in his dysfunction.

I began to realize that the theological understandings from our class were not as clearly understood at a heart level for this young man. He excelled in every class and joined all the appropriate professional clubs, but walled off deep hurts within himself. During our walk I asked him if he was afraid to allow Jesus to be with him. He said he did not think Jesus would want to be with him in such a state of sin. He was unable to make the leap of trust from his head to his heart, and therefore no one was invited to his most vulnerable places, not even our saving God.

Our American culture thrives on schizoid lives and hearts; I believe it vital that we offer young people opportunities to explore their innermost pains, weaknesses, and joys with our God. Vulnerability, humility, and devotion are anathema in our culture. Sadly young people often wall off their most significant feelings because no one invited them to bring these parts of themselves before one another and our God.

I believe young people can find reconciliation between their head and heart within our Ignatian spirituality and our Church tradition. I claim a starting point to such a task would be the familiarization with the Ignatian examen. Is it possible resident assistants could learn such an ancient art and share it with his floor? Can the basketball coach do such a task with her team before a practice? Could a professor integrate such a prayerful activity into her class material? Such a suggestion could lead young people to genuine personal integrity and a more intimate relationship with God. ■

James Riordan, S.J., is a scholastic for the Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus and currently a student in the first studies program at Loyola University Chicago.



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