

VIRTUAL CHURCH FOR YOUNG ADULTS

BustedHalo.com

Michael Hayes and Brett Hoover

SOME YEARS AGO, A MIDDLE-AGED PRIEST known to both of us was assigned to campus ministry work at a major university in the southern part of the United States. One day one of us debriefed him by phone about the experience of his first few months. While he thoroughly enjoyed working with the students, he nonetheless acknowledged a certain perplexity at what he perceived as their scattershot view of the world, their lack of ambition for responsibility, and their odd lurches, for instance between 'liberal' and 'conservative' values, or between religious commitment and the lack of it. 'I feel like I'm from a different world', he told one of us. He, of course, is not the only one to feel this way. In our travels across the US and Canada, and in our discussions with people from other parts of the world, we found dozens of parents, grandparents and church leaders expressing similar incomprehension about the attitudes and outlooks of those whom religious groups call 'young adults'.

In early 2000, Frank DeSiano CSP, then the President of a small US order of priests known as the Paulists, decided that the Paulists were well situated to address this generational and cultural gap. Founded in the US in the 1850s, the Paulists had decades of experience of work with various types of media, of ministry to students at secular universities, and of presence in city-centre locations where young people work. So DeSiano called a motley group of people together from all over the US and Canada in New York City, and asked us all to talk about what the Paulists might do to help the Roman Catholic Church in North America improve its outreach to young adults. A group of fifteen of us or so, young and old, priests and lay people, men and women, including some experts in ministry with young adults, toyed with various ideas. One of the most persistent was

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communicating to young adults about faith and spirituality in a place familiar to them, the World Wide Web. The result was the construction of the 'electronic magazine' for spirituality which eventually became BustedHalo.com. This article is about the people whom we are trying to serve with this project, and tells the story of why and how it happened.

Minding the Generation and Culture Gap

Why did BustedHalo.com come about? Why did it become necessary? Why has such a gap developed between contemporary Roman Catholic culture and the culture of young adults? Why do they appear to be different worlds?

It is probably a difference in outlook towards religion and spirituality that first catches an older generation's eye. In the US, at least, the different world of young adults is a spiritual world, but one where there is much doubt about religion. Studies show an overwhelming majority believe in God (79% in one study of those beginning university),¹ yet less than half of young adults under 30 believe that a religious upbringing will make a difference in making someone a moral person.² A research centre at Georgetown University found that only a quarter of Roman Catholic young adults claimed to attend mass every week (as opposed to 62% of those born before 1943).³ Of course, some young people continue to describe themselves as very (and traditionally) religious. But more report feeling connected to a 'loose spirituality'. Many invent spiritual practices for themselves in lieu of parish life, eschewing the Sunday pew for the beachfront, for a meditative walk in the park, for a yoga class, or even for a fitness regimen.

However, this somewhat lukewarm attitude toward traditional religious practice and commitment does not necessarily mean that

¹ Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA study, reported in G. Jeffrey MacDonald, 'Youthful Seekers Try to Find', *USA Today* (14 April 2004), available at http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2005-04-14-youthful-seekers_x.htm.

² Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 'Americans Struggle with Religion's Role at Home and Abroad, Part 1: Religion in America', available at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=386>, accessed 28 January 2006.

³ Mary E. Bendyna, *Young Adult Catholics*, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Special Report (Fall 2002), 4.

Catholic young adults are leaving the Church. When asked for a religious affiliation, they continue to identify themselves as Catholics, even if they do not attend Church or find the Church credible. In one study of confirmed Catholics in the US, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice*, 89% of surveyed young adults continued to identify with Catholicism. That number climbed to 91% when only Hispanic young adults were surveyed. In fact, 81% of Hispanic and 75% of non-Hispanic young adults admitted that they ‘cannot imagine being anything other than Catholic’.⁴

Such data take many by surprise. It makes sense, however, in the context of other factors that separate young adults from preceding generations and therefore also keep them away from parish communities. They undergo a longer transition to mature adulthood, an ‘extended adolescence’ marked by later marriage, by more advanced degrees and study, by unsettled geographic wandering, by an attachment to fast-paced media, by more travel, and by a great deal more time spent with peer friends (spending disposable income together if they have it). Generally they do not feel the need to seek spiritual community, and they will not do so unless they are assured that they will ‘get something out of it’: a sense of peace, philanthropic opportunity, or connection with like-minded people. Given that the Church cannot or will not deliver easy answers, young adults in a culture of immediate expectations look for other ‘worship stores’ in a spiritual marketplace, often engaging in non-religious activities that elicit a sense of the spiritual: outdoor recreation, club dancing, popular culture and art.

**A longer
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These options will often seem to be of equal value to any experience of prayer or ritual that organized religion can offer, especially as young adults are not marked by the same sense of ‘religious literacy’ as previous generations. Most young adults were initiated into the faith during the great transitions following Vatican II. Even those who had good formal instruction often journeyed with parents who were critical of institutions or puzzled by changes. Perhaps most importantly, young adults in North America today have not been brought up in the ethnically rooted (or at least tribally religious)

⁴ William Dinges, Juan Gonzalez, Dean Hoge and Mary Johnson, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, In: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 45.

Catholic cultures which socialised their parents and grandparents into a Catholic world. Remnants of these persist among young Hispanic and Asian-American Catholics, but economic and social forces today create for Catholic young adults a religious culture owing more to the dominant secular culture. If there are subcultural influences at all, they are therapeutic, evangelical Protestant or consumerist, rather than traditionally Catholic.

Young Adults in the US Church

These changes in culture, religious and otherwise, do much to explain why we felt a strong need to develop alternative outreaches to young adults. But there is one additional, and unfortunate, key factor: the Church's role in alienating young adults. Parishes, the centre of church life in North America, resist including the young people who do appear in church within their ministries and activities. They schedule ministry training and meetings at times inaccessible to young adults; they refuse to invite young adults into leadership groups such as parish and finance councils, even as prominent members mourn their own children's absence from the pews. Our experience is that older folk simply will not give up their turf. Moreover, the pace, music and tenor of liturgies suit the tastes of older people, and preaching takes place in a language unintelligible to young adults.

The situation is worse for the large number of Hispanic young people that make up the Catholic Church in the United States (in 2004, 34% of all Hispanics in the US were under 18).⁵ Many Hispanic young adults are predominantly English-speaking; they are members of the second or '1.5' generation (or even further down the generational line), and do not fit into the 'immigrant church' model of ministry effectively used among the recently arrived. Betwixt and between, neither immigrants nor 'Anglos', they often find it difficult to find a worshipping home. Other ethnic groups report broadly similar experiences.

A very large number of young adults, as a result of their continuing desire to identify themselves as Catholic, enter parish life on an occasional basis, usually in search of the sacraments of marriage or infant baptism. These 'moments of return' are crucial evangelizing

⁵ *Hispanic Trends* (July-August 2005), 20.

times for the Church, yet most often young adults in the US find themselves turned away. There is a personality or cultural clash with the priest or the parish secretary; there is some kind of canonical or bureaucratic difficulty arising from the fact that they are not registered in the parish. In the past, Catholic priests looked with a certain complacency at young people lapsing; they would come back to the fold when the time came for marriage or baptism. Unfortunately we can no longer take this for granted.

Of course there are significant exceptions to these trends: a handful of lively urban parishes; some vigorous campus ministry programmes at both secular and Catholic colleges; and a few conservative Catholic organizations, movements and colleges. These latter are sometimes grouped together and called the 'new faithful' or the 'neo-orthodox movement'. Their membership is statistically small. They offer a particular kind of Catholic doctrinal 'purity' as the solution to contemporary societal and personal insecurities; and they provide a disproportionate number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

The Birth of BustedHalo

In the autumn of 2000, the two of us were given the task by the Paulist leadership of establishing a young adult outreach on the Web. We began with a prolonged period of listening and creative thinking. Having seen (and participated in) more than one ministerial project which foundered on an inattentiveness to the felt needs of real people out there, we eagerly worked with our partners at Paulist Media Works, the communication-technology arm of the Paulists, to develop ways of finding out what young adults might want from a website. Months of focus groups and informal surveying followed, culminating in an extensive survey conducted over the Web. We also visited popular stores, restaurants and other establishments frequented by young adults; we looked at endless websites, skimmed inspirational and self-help books, and investigated successful young adult religious groups, both in the Roman Catholic Church and beyond.

The outcome changed our whole concept of what we wanted to do. Initially we had conceived of a personality-driven site, centred on 'web hosts' with whom people could identify and 'bond'. Our survey told us (and the focus groups concurred) that 50% of our 'audience'

were looking primarily for information when online, while only 10% sought interaction. ‘Web hosts’ were likely to be a big mistake. We decided instead on an information-orientated site presented simply, visually and almost completely without religious jargon. If we did have to use religious language, we made sure that there were good links explaining it. It would be half a ‘virtual catechism’, a truly accessible guide to Catholic tradition, and half an ‘electronic magazine’ of spirituality, that is, an up-to-date set of peer reflections on relevant topics.

The first half we called ‘Faith Guides’. It included sections on scripture, on prayer and on the liturgy. There were also periodic updates on various aspects of tradition, a feature which we called ‘Tradition Bytes’ (now finished). Then we had an interfaith trivia game called ‘Dante’s Trivia Inferno’. The e-magazine half of the site had sections on spirituality, relationships, work and ‘human dimensions’—the last a home for discussions of the arts, popular culture, politics and cultural heritage. When the site was revamped in 2005, the list was revised: spirituality; sex and relationships; politics and culture; entertainment; an earthy section entitled ‘real life’; the ‘word on the street’ from roving interviewers of young people; and ‘profiles’, with information about inspirational people. Most of the writing has been done by young adults. Even the authors of ‘Faith Guides’, the material on Catholic tradition, were young people with appropriate expertise.

Selling to Seekers

If we were to be attractive amid the demographic realities that we were addressing, and especially if we were to reach the less churched people at whom we were really aiming, we needed more than a sound, interesting site. We needed to package it all together with the right URL or domain name, with the web address that becomes a household name (or even a verb in the case of ‘google’). We wanted something that people would remember and connect with emotionally, something charged and energetic.

Lots of names came and went in our endless discussions on the topic, most of them dull. We played for a long time with seekingmore.com, because it seemed to say something about a spiritual search, yet it too lacked flavour. One Sunday, one of us was out at a focus group in the Bronx in New York City at a Hispanic parish, and a

lively group of young adults made a joke suggestion: BrokenHalo.com or BustedHalo.com. They were teasing each other about whose halo was more broken or busted than the rest. They appeared to be kidding, but we saw how this particular name produced more of a reaction that almost anything we had tested. When we added it to our test list among the focus groups, it produced unexpected results. Almost universally, young adults liked it. It seemed to connote to them humanity and earthiness, and somehow to say that none of us is perfect: a kind of resonance with their experience that they did not generally associate with the Church. But in our informal surveys of Catholics over forty, we found a different response; to them BustedHalo sounded like Catholic guilt used as a battering-ram. Yet again, the Church was telling people that here was something wrong with them. No one under forty gave us that response, presumably because they had not had the same experience of guilt-intensive preaching and teaching. Even these negative responses were emotionally resonant, however, and we decided that we had a name which people could hold on to.

Once we had beta-tested the site, we were ready to unleash BustedHalo. Given that our target audience was at the edge, or even beyond the limits, of church communities, we decided to advertise our launch on secular websites popular with people in their twenties and thirties. Both of us were fans of the satirical web newspaper *The Onion* (www.theonion.com), and wondered if it might prove a suitable venue. With the help of Paulist Media Works, we design an inexpensive animated ad that featured a priest looking aghast and shocked on one frame and our URL on the other. It functioned nearly perfectly, boosting the very few daily hits our site received to nearly 2000. The real success was the *kind* of



person who typically hit on our ad: a somewhat irreverent seeker-type, who found in us a safe place to discuss issues of faith with which they were struggling, without any fear of judgment or retribution. They also found us speaking on issues that they did not expect a religious website to cover: sex, politics and, as time went on, the ongoing scandal in the US about priests and sexual abuse. A year later we advertised on The Hunger Site (www.thehungersite.com), again with significant, if not quite such great, success. When visitors came to us from this site we were making a donation to hunger-fighting organizations such as Mercy Corps. This seemed to us like a perfect match: we were drawing in our target audience and making a contribution to a good cause.

Doctrinal Purity and the Discussion Board

Many of the seekers drawn to our site from the advertising found themselves gravitating to one particular feature: the BustedHalo Discussion Board Forum. This was not like a chatroom, but rather a moderated set of message boards enabling discussion on the issues concerning young adults regarding the Church in particular and the world more generally. Our policy was to allow open discussion on any issue, and therefore to allow questions about Church teaching. Visitors to the board could talk about their comfort or discomfort with various tenets of the Faith. Several Paulist priests agreed to act as ‘online chaplains’, offering the wisdom of the tradition when it was asked for; but generally the chaplains did not participate in the discussion, and just allowed free-flowing conversation to happen.

Eventually, a few activists from ‘new faithful’ or ‘neo-orthodox’ organizations learned about the board, and were prompted to come to it in order to ‘defend the faith’. Typically, the seeker-types using the board nevertheless identified themselves as Catholic. Now they were being accused of ‘not being Catholic’ or of ‘not being orthodox’. These activists seemed to be chasing people off the board. Eventually we shut the board down for a time, and then re-enrolled the membership, creating a Terms of Service agreement forbidding users to question the orthodoxy of other users. In this new dispensation intimidation ended and something else took its place. Often a respectful dialogue grew up between two opposing groups. Young Catholics of the Left and the Right, once assured that both sides cared about the Church, proved able to talk. These exchanges proved so successful that they led to the

establishment of The Spiritual Smackdown Blog, where Catholics from the two ends of the spectrum face off in a debate for roughly a month. Others also weigh in with their contributions on the topic. We have found that the two sides do charitably coexist as brothers and sisters in Christ, even if they maintain their differences within the charged, polarised atmosphere of our contemporary culture wars. Interestingly, we note that it is conservative women rather than men, but liberal men rather than women, who find this task easier. And in general, BustedHalo has become, with some facilitation, a place for heated, yet almost always peaceful, debate.



Religious Education and the Web

Consistently since BustedHalo's launch in late 2001, its Faith Guides sections have received the lion's share of visitors—particularly Mass Class, Bible Boot Camp, and How to Pray. In a 2005 update of the site, its Question Box feature (in which any question was answered, either by e-mail or on the site) was transferred to a specific Paulist priest, Fr Joe Scott ('Ask Fr Joe'). What was previously a moderately well-visited section became another of the most popular pages on the site.

The visitor statistics confirm both what we had initially discovered about how young people primarily went to the Web for information, and also the familiar research about the lack of religious literacy among young adults. One visitor commented that the site helped her 'explain different aspects of Catholicism to my husband who is not Catholic'. Another noted of the Question Box, 'It's nice to know that if I am embarrassed by a question or can't get to a priest to ask him, then that I can visit the site and be guaranteed an answer'. In today's world, many young adults have no idea how to find out information about Catholic tradition from the standard sources, and a site like BustedHalo gives them an opportunity in a medium with which they are familiar.

Furthermore, a lot of Catholic sources on the internet, while purporting to be 'orthodox' and 'faithful to the magisterium', are in fact run by organizations with ultra-conservative agendas. Their information sometimes draws on pre-conciliar sources alone, and they make pointedly negative comments about Catholics with any openness to contemporary ideas. They illustrate the ambivalent phenomenon which the theologian Paul Lakeland calls 'nostalgic postmodernity'.⁶ Because many of the websites push this nostalgia for the pre-modern to its extremity, some of our visitors found BustedHalo's approach refreshing: 'Frankly when it comes to Catholicism on the web, there is a lot of malarkey out there, so keep fighting the good fight'. Naturally those individuals from the 'new faithful' or neo-orthodox movement disagreed. For its part, one of these watchdog Catholic sites faulted BustedHalo for taking ads from 'secular businesses', for making available the names of 'Newman Centers and "Catholic communities" that offer "open discussions" and "contemporary Catholicism"', and for directly describing the nature of Buddhist and Jewish prayer.

Apart from these 'Catholic culture wars', local church organizations have found the plain-spoken and up-to-date nature of BustedHalo's web resources helpful in the religious education of young people. This may be particularly true in locales where resources are less easy to come by. We found the campus ministry programme of the diocese of Little Rock using the Bible Boot Camp, and a religious studies professor in a small Catholic college in New Brunswick, Canada, using the site.

Of course, we are rather lacking in direct feedback. Raw statistics about unique visitors (number of different individuals who visit) do not really give us the same helpful range of responses (or gratification) as when we engage a group of young adults on retreat, or in a counselling or pastoral care situation. There are nevertheless some opportunities for interaction and pastoral work. One has come with the aforementioned 'Question Box'. The feature was based on an old parish mission custom of the Paulists which had already given rise to a bestselling book.⁷ It provided users with the opportunity to let us know

⁶ Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 11, 17.

⁷ Bertrand L. Conway, *The Question Box: Replies to Questions Received on Missions to Non-Catholics* (New York: Paulist, 1929).

what questions and concerns were on their minds. Often the question e-mailed became an opportunity for pastoral care rather than just for a simple straightforward answer. One questioner asked about the death of unbaptized babies. Mike quickly uncovered the source of the question—this person was seeking comfort after a miscarriage—and he ended up corresponding at length for weeks in an attempt to help her heal and be at peace with herself and her God.

Much of the time, however, this kind of pastoral care does not result. Often even a sensitive response to a question does not prompt a response in kind. It becomes a ‘take it and leave it’ situation. We believe—and the statistics tend to confirm this—that many people merely lurk on the site, checking out the answers posted, but never typing in a question or reaching out to a peer on the discussion board. People have their reasons for taking advantage of the anonymity of the internet, just as they do with confession. Sometimes that anonymity helps people to unload their burdens or to find information that they cannot bear to ask for in person; sometimes lost people just stay lost.

Real Issues

When we developed the two sides (Faith Guides and the e-magazine) of BustedHalo, our hope was that the electronic magazine would enable us to address new issues that might emerge, and also to entice people into returning to the site and forming a kind of ‘virtual community’. I do not think we understood the power of what we were creating. Many young adults do not attend church with any frequency; those who do find their way there have little opportunity to express their experience and perspectives. There are almost no places to discuss how spirituality and their life experience intersect, and even fewer that are informed by Catholic and other religious traditions. We found we were offering an almost unique opportunity with the e-magazine and the discussion boards linked to it.

Nowhere did this become more apparent than when, at the insistence of our writers, we began seriously to address sex and relationships. At a meeting one summer of our writers in New York City, we began to look at sex as a topic for more articles on the site. It seemed like an obvious choice: a clear interest of young adults, and a flashpoint for Catholic teaching. Our writers, however, made a demand. There had to be a real freedom to address the subject as

young adults were actually experiencing it—we could not lapse into the typical Catholic extremes of ‘just say no’ or an unreachably idealistic personalism. They wanted something else for BustedHalo: people’s real questions and concerns. One young married writer inaugurated the series, ‘Sex on BustedHalo’, with a piece on this very subject:

I heard a talk by a well-known priest reflecting on sexuality as spirituality. For over an hour, he kept emphasizing the power of human sexuality. It is our deepest connection to God, he said. It is either sacred or perverse, he insisted. It cannot be neutral. As he talked, I kept thinking to myself, this is spoken like someone who doesn’t have sex. In the context of an ongoing relationship, yes, sometimes sex is beautiful, powerful, creative. But other times, it is a daily exercise, like brushing your teeth.⁸

The series, which embraced both sex and relationships, opened up to other topics: gay marriage, male-female differences, talking with parents about sex, the emptiness of the ‘hooking up’ phenomenon. Wherever there was church teaching on the subject, it was prominently presented, though young adults were always to be given a chance to reflect on their own experience. Eventually BustedHalo hired Dr Christine Whelan, a social historian in her twenties who had specialised in the history of dating and relationships, to write a relationships column called ‘Pure Sex, Pure Love’. Now extremely popular, her column has tackled everything from chastity, first impressions, why attractive single women are often dateless, to *Sex and the City*, women’s magazines, ‘how far is too far’, and when to say the ‘L-word’. Whelan generally encourages a holistic but chaste approach to sexuality and relationships, and by conviction she always seeks out the experience of other young adults in presenting her point. The feedback from both ‘Sex on BustedHalo’ and ‘Pure Sex, Pure Love’ was strong. Some of it was sharply critical; after all, controversial topics were being discussed. But it was clear that people appreciated the depth of the articles and the mining of young adult experience.

⁸ Claire Noonan, ‘Speaking of Sex: A Harbor for the Spiritually Alive to Talk About Sex’, available at http://www.bustedhalo.com/features/sex_rel_2003_38relationships.htm.

On a different front, BustedHalo's popular series of profiles and interviews have shown, despite stereotypes suggesting the contrary, how interested US young adults remain in contemporary political, cultural and religious issues. Recently, the interviews have become particularly prominent, highlighting the professionalism of the project and the staff and increasing the site's reputation. Former US President Jimmy Carter touted his new book on the site recently, as did Anne Rice, author of the bestselling novel *Interview with the Vampire*, who is now writing novels about Jesus. There have also been contributions from figures regarded as rather controversial in church circles, such as the evangelical political activist and pastor Jim Wallis, and Garry Wills, perhaps best known as the author of a book called *Papal Sin*.⁹ Besides drawing the attention of our young audience, these interviews helped BustedHalo.com carve a niche for itself in the 'Catholic market', since



most Catholic-orientated publications in the US have not been making such interviews a priority.

Issues about moral decision-making always evoke a strong response from our visitors, and BustedHalo has regularly broached controversial topics such as abortion, evolution and intelligent design, and gays in seminaries. A new series entitled 'Moral Dilemmas' has turned into an interactive feature, eliciting hundreds of responses. We present the readers with a situation—for example, the challenge of reaching out to a street person, or of being asked to witness at a wedding of which you do not approve. After a few days, we add a twist to the case, and then a moral theologian to add his or her thoughts to the mix. Meanwhile, visitors can send in their response to their dilemma, telling us what they believe 'the right thing to do' is. People in the US are accustomed to controversy both in entertainment and in education. These dilemma situations challenge them to argue about serious and large

⁹ *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000).

issues—and we hope that this helps them with the dilemmas that they are facing in their own lives.

BustedHalo.com, now in its fourth year, continues to function as a pastoral outreach, and has been improved in various ways. In 2004 Bill McGarvey, a lifelong Catholic and former magazine editor, took over from Brett as editor-in-chief, and many new features and innovations can be traced to him, including the profiles, street polling, and much of the 2005 redesign. In late 2005, Mike and Paulist Father Dave Dwyer introduced weekly podcasts, a kind of audio news magazine for download on an ipod or mp3 player. All through this time the number of new visitors to the site has continued to rise.

Yet in some ways not much has changed. The mission of the site remains to reach out to that majority of young adults ‘whose journey has little to do with religious institutions’, and to offer them an alternative that is at once different and Catholic in order to help them recognise and know the love of God already present in their lives. The signs of its effect are inevitably scattered. But they are enough to make us believe that it is having an impact.

Michael Hayes co-founded BustedHalo.com and serves as the managing editor and a frequent staff writer. Now working on his latest book, *Googling God*, with Paulist Press, Mike received a Catholic Press Association Award for his article ‘Transformation and the 20’s and 30’s Crowd’, which appeared in *Share the Word* magazine. Mike is married and lives in New York City.

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