

YOUTH CULTURE AND ITS CHALLENGES

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It is no secret that the future of the Church lies in young people and that future will depend on our capacity to bring these young people closer to Jesus Christ. For those of us who are no longer so young, this entails making an effort to communicate a thousand-year-old experience of salvation in a way that makes sense for the youth of today. It is for this reason that we intend to reflect here on the fundamental aspects of the culture we observe in youth in Chile,¹ in the hope that it can illuminate reflections in other places.

We will do this in a simple way and the first step in the process will be to *look at the reality* of the young people we are facing. What we present may appear too pessimistic. It is true that there is a lot to be thankful for in youth that does not appear in this article. This is a choice based on a methodology that aims at discovering the pastoral needs of youth today. Having observed the reality, the second step will be an attempt to *interpret it* in an effort to discover the general causes of what is happening to them. Finally, we will offer a *proposal* indicating where the emphasis should be placed in the pastoral initiatives whose objectives include the formation of to-day's youth.

The limits of this reflection are clear. On the one hand, it hails from Chile, a country which has undergone continuous economic growth during the last two decades and which has opened its doors to cultural and economic globalization. On the other, the young people we are studying are mainly those who are more exposed to this cultural phenomenon because

of their social condition and education. Even so we believe that, on the whole, and sooner rather than later, these reflections will influence all the young people of our country, in spite of the slight differences we might find in different groups.

A look at youth

The reality of young people can be approached from various starting points. On the one hand, we have ever more statistical data which illustrate quite well what is happening. In addition, there is the very real experience of those of us who work with youth and read their life, even though it might be quite a while since some of us were actually young! It is also very important to listen to what young people have to say about themselves.

General situation

What do those who work with youth observe? What is immediately obvious is the existence of diverse youth cultures. Nowadays, we meet real “**urban gangs**” which, at first glance are distinguished by the way they dress and the places they frequent. In some cases, we find real ideologies which nourish these groups. Can there be any way of establishing a common pattern or tendency which covers the whole range of youth groups? We can at least affirm a few things.

In Chile, the last 25 years have been accompanied by continuous economic growth. More and more young people come from professional families or, at least, from a family where their parents enjoy a much better life style than their grandparents did. This has changed the perspective of the personal, professional and economic development they aspire to. They have an ever wider range of experiences through holidays and journeys both inside as well as outside the country: space has become smaller. To give just one example: in 1990 the train took 27 hours to make the journey from Santiago to Puerto Montt². Today, in 27 hours, you can reach Shanghai at the other end of the world.

This economic prosperity also brings with it the great possibility of easy access to drugs. Narcotics can be obtained on all social level, of different quality perhaps, but still drugs when all is said and done.

The access they have to **technology and information** hailing from diverse points of the planet is also well known. Access to the Internet, the access of the masses to television and, in general, the growth of the entertainment industry, all lead to the fact that youth are highly stimulated by the world and the great variety of goods it offers them. Audiovisual technologies and the enormous number of instruments that allow them to record, modify, and show, both audio and pictures are an example of this.

They are used to managing **hypertexts**. That is they surf the Web, reading texts, looking at pictures, but without any need to finish them. As they do this, they come upon links to other pages, which in turn lead them to even more pages. Therefore, their thought is lost in the non-linear world of the Web: they wander through it quite naturally, without the need to finish a discourse or to reach any conclusion. The effect of this is that their ability to concentrate and focus is greatly limited. Their attention span in class, for example, becomes shorter and shorter, which obliges teachers to find different ways of stimulating them within a single class.

They live in an **audiovisual world** which means that their interactions take place by means of images. They communicate through pictures by means of computers, but the image or picture is also the sign of the urban “gang” they belong to. They mark their choices by symbols, ways of dressing, tattoos, colours, ways of walking and key words. The other side of this is that the presence of pictures which are already defined stunts the growth of their imagination and the ability to create their own fantasy world. In a novel you have to re-create your own world, in a film this world is created for you.

Sexual life now starts earlier although the beginning of married life is postponed. Talking about the need for marriage in order to have sexual relations does not make much sense to them at the present time. Although they find it reasonable, there are many factors today impelling them to engage in sexual intimacy without the corresponding commitment. Also, the sexual liberation of women has put greater demands on men: today greater sensitivity and affection is demanded of men than before.

The young are also perceived as **interiorly fragmented persons**. That is, it is not a problem for them to appear as different people according to the contexts in which they find themselves. This is a virtue in so far as it enables them to be more flexible and to participate in various groups, but it faces them with the question as to who they really are. Building one’s identity is much more difficult nowadays. They aspire to be authentic, but it costs

them a lot to do so in a world where each space they belong, demands a different behaviour.

Globalisation also forces them to be **more homogeneous at world level**. There is a greater similarity today between young people from the upper class of any South American country and those from the same class in Europe or North America, than with young people from the lower class of their own country. The same is true of lower class youth: there is more similarity between the same classes in different countries than thirty years ago. Fashions, tastes, songs and criteria today transcend individual countries.

Self-concept

So, what about the youth themselves, what do they say? Does the way they perceive themselves agree with the picture above?

They notice in themselves and in their peers a lack of interest in others and in what is going on in society. They realize they are turned in on themselves at this stage of their life cycle, but they also see very clearly that they are encouraged to maintain this attitude by a highly individualistic society. They feel fragile and insecure when called upon to face challenges or situations of uncertainty which require them to make decisions. Escape is high on their agenda: the consumption of alcohol and of all things new is on the increase. They admit they are addicted to chat on internet, to the computer, to television, to the mobile phone.

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They feel the need to be protected by their parents who, albeit with good intentions, spoil them and make life easier for them.

They are a generation of **quick and superficial passions**. Their own definition of themselves is that of the “uncompleted orgasm” generation, one which seeks satisfaction, but never obtains it, because it jumps from one source to the other, as if it were “zapping”.

The challenges facing youth

How do we sort out this vast group of impressions about youth today? For this purpose, we shall use a scheme taken from Jürgen Habermas³ theory of knowledge. According to this theory the whole human group must face four fundamental challenges: survival, living together in a group, internal government of the group and coexistence with other groups. The way the group faces these fundamental challenges can help us describe a group's culture or subculture.

*young people manifest
a great fear of failure*

To these challenges must be added a fifth dimension which runs through the four former challenges. This is the transcendent dimension which looks for the meaning of the solution to the challenges mentioned above. In short, why survive? Or why live with this group?

A. The challenge of survival

Youth is a vital phase in the transition from complete paternal dependence in childhood to adult responsibility. This generation has at its disposal various means which the preceding generation did not have: they can speak a second language, at least at the basic level, they are skilled in the use of a computer, they use the computer or Internet every day or almost every day, and almost all of them possess a mobile phone. Thus, they are much more connected with each other and with their parents.

In these times of strong competition, when faced with the challenge of survival, young people manifest a great **fear of failure**. On the one hand this is a fear of not being able to study what they want at university, fear of not finding work in the future, fear of rejection by failing in important moments of their life. Finally, they are also afraid of commitment, which is revealed in their reluctance to marry and form a family. For Ignatius of Loyola, fear produces a paralysing effect which stops us from taking risks in seeking God's will. The risk of the future is sometimes transformed into the pleasure of the present moment, at other times into pragmatism and at others still into submission to the decision of others.

In short, they are a generation which is connected permanently and under great **pressure to succeed**. However, this "success" is rarely

defined and frequently the struggle to attain it is a struggle with a phantom that is hard to grasp because adults have not been able to indicate what it is all about. Schools insist strongly on academic success, very often without indicating clearly the meaning this may have. From this point of view school education has somewhat lost its bearings in the formation of integral persons.

B. The challenge of living together

In their life cycle, friendship occupies an important position, at its very centre. They are going through a moment of definition of their identity, where what they most want is to belong to a group as their point of reference. Within this group they will learn values. For example, in Chile 63.7% of young people speak about sexual subjects with their friends, while only 39.8% do so with their mothers.

In spite of the strength of their desire to belong to a group and to be appreciated socially, young people also manifest an **increasing individualism**. They may show a formal friendship but it is often superficial, and its bonds are fragile. Many feel lonely both within their relational groups and within their families. Unfortunately, even though ways of connecting have grown, it would seem that their capacity to establish personal bonds has not increased.

At parties and in their leisure time young people speak, dance, and drink quite a bit of alcohol. It is a time to relax, away from the authority of their parents and of school pressure. **Sexuality** is enjoyed during these times: for many of them it is the feelings they experience at that moment that are enough to lead them on to sexual relations (61.2% in Chile), for others love is enough (29.2%). On the whole these sexual relations take place with their boy-friend or girl-friend, but sometimes with a casual friend. The places are frankly unsuitable: rooms in the place where the party is taking place, the bathroom of the house of one of the two partners, cars. There is a lot of curiosity behind these sexual relations, the desire to feel grown up, a lot of solitude and also affection. With regard to this, we do not wish to qualify these relations as perverse; many young people truly feel that they are showing love for their partner and are honest in having them. The only thing we could accuse them of is a lack of perspective and maturity or of confusing love with other things which are not love.

C. The challenge of authority

Young people are ambivalent in their relationship with authority. On the one hand they show a **desire to be independent** and to decide for themselves. On the other, they manifest a great fear of taking charge of their own lives. An important element is the use of the mobile phone as an instrument of the parent-child relationship. There is both presence and contact, but no relationship. It gives parents the feeling of keeping control over their child, diminishes the anxiety of not knowing where they are at night and assures them that if he/she needs anything they have the means to reach them. But the opposite is also true: children control their parents so that they cover for their negligence at school or drive them from one place to another at the most unearthly hours.

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We notice that parents have a lot of work to do and young people have **ever more fronts** on which to occupy themselves: academic, sports, social, language academies, music, dance, computers.

The conflict with parents has increased given that there are no common norms or objectives. As a result, there are either open conflicts or there are simply no relations. It is much more difficult to maintain authority in front of a young person who has at his/her disposal arguments and experiences that come from all parts of the world through the Internet with which he/she can far surpass the opinions his/her parents may hold. Some do not appreciate the experience and others do not appreciate what the young person has to offer.

When young people are asked what the principal family problems are, they indicate the **lack of time for sharing**. One of them commented eloquently: “we do not have the time to live together”.

Economic prosperity has led many parents to experience a second adolescence, enjoying, and profiting, from goods, novelties and fashions. They set no limits to their children’s education and they allow them to grow up with the impression that they can do anything and that their parents will be there to guarantee it. The difficulty of this is shown when they meet their first reversals in life, which they are not prepared to face. That is the way of life and parents will not always be there to protect them.

Possibly up to well into the 20th century the family, as well as political and educational institutions, encouraged young people to go out of themselves so as to leave adolescence and pass on to adulthood. Nowadays, adults value self-centredness. Grown-ups are beginning to doubt their own maturity and seem not to want to grow up, so that the **adult model has become inconsistent** ⁴.

Finally, parents transmit a lot of their values to youth, whether explicitly or not. Very often they also transmit to them their fears and their hatreds. In a country like Chile it is significant that, after 35 years, Pinochet and his government continue to be the political reference, as his funeral proved.

D. The challenge of co-existence

This generation is suspicious of utopias and global projects. In this sense it is pragmatic and has a short term vision. They take care of the present and have difficulty in imagining possible futures. They have great difficulty in imagining an inclusive social project, in projecting their desires on to the whole society.

with parents there are no common codes or objectives

Frequently the idea is to aspire to personal triumphs and *only afterwards* think about others.

This tendency is clearly observed in the relationship they have with politics. They appreciate democracy, but think it can be perfected; they feel politicians have no interest in them, so they do not identify themselves with political parties. For this reason, the level of registration in electoral registers is low.

This phenomenon is part of the crisis they have with institutions. They have less and less confidence in the Church and in the means of social communication. Being self-centred young people, they have a hard time seeing signs of truth in others apart from themselves; they have strong desires of independence. Thus, it is hard for them to understand the need to associate with others in order to build society or to realize a common project.

E. The challenge of finding meaning

While they do not usually question the meaning of what they are doing, they do realize that they feel ill at ease with the way they are living. Their continuous searching is an attempt to attain something that is really worthwhile. Some of them find meaning in the formation of a family, others are able to see farther and aspire to a social project through politics or participation in community organizations. For many the gregarious feeling that urges them to belong to a larger group simply means being a supporter of some football team.

In Chile the biggest commitment youth show is to their families (78.3%)⁵ or to themselves (28.6%). These are the principal reference points which give meaning to the actions they undertake. Commitment to God is lower (23.6%) and much lower is their commitment to country (7.6%) and to justice (3.1%). In short, as a general tendency, **meaning is neither transcendental nor social**, but they are searching.

On the other hand, in their quest for transcendence (those who believe) they tend much more to syncretism and combine elements of Christianity with UFOs, reincarnation and self-knowledge. It would seem that they find themselves in front of a market of proposals of meaning and, from the vast range offered, pick what attracts them most or is most convenient.

Trying to understand

How can we interpret what is happening to youth in our times? It seems youth today are the clearest manifestation of contemporary culture. In them also we see, very clearly, the human consequences of this culture. In order to interpret this culture we find Albert Borgmann's *apparatus paradigm* meaningful⁶. We believe this vision, which might seem excessively pessimistic, allows us to articulate a series of isolated cultural phenomena quite coherently and sheds light on how to overcome the situation. While acknowledging the benefits of technology as a means, Borgmann allows us to understand its consequences more clearly.

An **apparatus** is a mechanism, a tool or an instrument which can have a physical character – such as the mobile phone – or an ideal – such as the “state apparatus”- which has been technologically conceived to respond

to a need. If we think about it, we are full of apparatus in our homes and our work-places, which have been conceived after careful analysis and have been perfected to satisfy a particular need.

The problem with the technological understanding of reality is that in its commitment to satisfy needs **it has fragmented reality**. Its effort lies in the analysis and not in the synthesis which offers significance and meanings to things. Let us give an example. Up to a very short time ago in the history of humanity, if we wanted to have bread at table, we had to set in motion a whole series of social relations. First of all, we had to sow wheat or buy it at the market in sacks. Then we ground it at home. Some went to cut wood while others began to knead the dough. The oven was lit and we waited patiently to take out the fresh bread. Nowadays we go to the supermarket, where bread is available 24 hours a day as well as a person who smiles at us when we arrive. Or, if we prefer, we can buy it on the Internet and it is delivered to us at home.

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Another example: up to a short time ago, if we wished to listen to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, we had to go to the village square or to the city theatre, where there was a whole network of people interacting with each other, and an orchestra which had rehearsed many times to coordinate the rhythms and the notes. Today we can listen to it wherever we wish, at the time we wish, with the best fidelity of sound and interpreted by the best orchestra in the world... whose musicians possibly died quite a few years ago.

Behind this technological paradigm we have various losses of which we are not always conscious. On the one hand, we lose many social relations with others. The notions of time and space have been reduced remarkably. The apparatus are essentially "available" at every moment and everywhere, thanks to which our comfort increases and our capacity to face failure and frustration diminishes. We begin to believe that there are no limits in life.

A less evident consequence is that we begin to treat people and institutions like instruments. With many of them we establish a **client relationship**, uncommitted and easy to break: if we like the product, we continue to buy it; if not, we complain or we simply stop buying it. This happens to us with regards to the Church, political parties, democracy, the

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family and, at times, our partner. At the heart of a relationship with a client is satisfaction... we marry “till *dissatisfaction* separates us”.

This centrality of the satisfaction of the client is especially clear in the growth that is taking place in the **entertainment** industry. Firstly, the fact that we have very little capacity to entertain ourselves plays a decisive role. And secondly, entertainment often has more characteristics of distraction; usually, distraction from our own life.

The specific nature of the analysis and the consequent narrow range of applications of an apparatus, are gradually rendering our experience poorer. In order to enrich life we need other instruments. So it is that a sedentary life needs a gymnasium as a complement, the lack of friendly relationships gives rise to the need for psychologists; thus we are covering new needs with new instruments. The promise that technology would give us more time for leisure seems to have left us busier than before. The problem has its roots in the very logic of fragmentation implicit in technology.

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The world too is becoming duller. The relationship with the simple tools of the past was more direct and on a human scale. Many times in the past we would fix a Citroen with a piece of wire; nowadays if you take a car apart, you must call the technician to reprogramme the computer it carries.

Proposals

We believe that the proposal passes through the construction of a new culture which springs from the depths of our faith and its tradition. Maybe what we need to try and do is imbue contemporary culture with the Spirit, so as to be able to “focus” things correctly and situate ourselves humanly in front of them. This is a proposal which reclaims what is

fundamental to the human condition and permits us to build a new person. We shall develop both points in what follows

Building a new culture

The fragmentation of the world has set the focus on the outward satisfaction of domestic and work obligations. Work and home are full of “dead” moments, apparently boring and without novelty. In view of this, young people seek to fill their lives with entertainment and the consumption of new “experiences” which are simply anecdotal.

This raises the necessity of **rediscovering that which is given freely**, contemplation and silence. Experiences in the midst of nature, following life’s rhythm, allow us to discover that the most important things are woven slowly, at the speed at which grass grows. Here, we recognize life as gift. In the midst of nature it is also possible for us to recognize the value of austerity. Here we start with the bare minimum, we move from one place to the other with the insecurity of the People of God in the middle of the desert. Here, we get rid of the superfluous in order to focus on what is really necessary: good company, physical health and God. A spirituality that is founded on the experience of being *nurtured* by God seems to be particularly fitting. However, this foundation seems to be difficult to establish given the self-sufficiency of the technological world.

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Faced with the loneliness generated by *tool* relations between people and the loneliness of virtual relations, we need to increase space for **real relations**. How can we promote links with others? One of the characteristics of adult psychology is the capacity to put ourselves in the other’s place, to empathize with him/her. To take it even further, maturity in love consists in the capacity to place the other at the centre of our life and to abandon adolescent egoism. In this respect, it seems important to promote among youth the experience of spiritual conversation, promoted so strongly by Ignatius. True conversation, which calls into play all our senses, is the way we really experience the other (*SpEx. 121*).

One of the most helpful experiences in this sense is that of the disinterested service of someone in need. Here, indeed, we need to pay attention to two emphases which we deem harmful. The first is putting the emphasis on the productivity of the service. While it is certain that efficiency, both in attaining the objectives and in the use of resources, is an ethical imperative, there is no need to emphasise that the young person is going to “help” those who have nothing, who know nothing or who can do nothing. This places him/her in a position of superiority which prevents him/her from having an adult relationship with the person he is serving; dialogue is seen as a relationship of reciprocal enrichment because both have something to offer and something to give. The second is putting the accent on the product and not on the relationship. We believe that the experience of establishing an affective relationship with concrete persons who are in a situation of need has a much greater impact on the formation of *persons for others*. Apart from that, the products required to obtain justice vary greatly according to the context and the epoch.

Models are a source of formation that is always important: people who demonstrate a style of life which orients our own lives. It is a fundamental mechanism of psychological projection. The lack of adult models and parents who establish clear limits gives a feeling of liberty at first. Later, however, it generates anxiety in young people, given that everything is subject to personal discernment and decision making. In their relation with their parents, the establishment of limits teaches them that there are things which are not subject to either discernment or choice, and it is a clear way to learn values and criteria for action. We all find it hard to experience limitation; still, young people demand **coherent life models** who themselves live out what they demand of others, given that a great part of the learning of values is acquired from seeing trustworthy adults who put them into practice⁷. This requires that parents and adults who work with youth cultivate the **putting aside of their own interests** to grow in the capacity to give of themselves.

It is also necessary to turn away from a culture that promotes lack of interest or apathy to a culture of **dialogue**. In a world that is becoming more and more pluralistic it is also becoming important to be able to count on people who are able to establish dialogue and build bridges which permit the construction of common projects. Even though there is a tendency to form *ghettos* among people of the same mind, we believe that Christians

today should reinforce their identity through a deep experience of Jesus Christ, but also be able to discover the Spirit who breathes where He wills. This last point is the basis for collaboration in a society with people of different creeds and experiences of God.

Finally, instead of the syncretism that is produced in this market of feelings, young people's experience of faith should have as its objective the **fulfilment of humanity in love**. Love is the only way human beings have of reaching the plenitude of their development. It is in this way that the true education of freedom should gradually lead to greater and better expressions of love in our youth. Thus reflection on the pedagogy of Christian freedom, which seeks to know, love and follow Jesus Christ, becomes necessary, since with his life, death and resurrection he teaches us, men and women alike, to love truly, giving our lives if necessary, even for our enemies.

Building a new person

In contemporary culture, young people are being built from the outside by the demands of the market which dictate to them what they must do, how they must live their lives. This implies that their life styles are essentially transitory and superficial. In order to face the above mentioned challenges we will have to aim at **building youth from the inside**, starting with their experiences and their reflections on these experiences. Interior life, prayer and community experience lived out of faith, allow them to follow an honest path that takes the person as a whole and not only parts of him/her. But there are other aspects.

The present culture, with so many goods available, creates fragile young people who depend on many external support structures. It is vital to recover the value of personal **discipline** in the use of time and of space. Only the incorporation of clear values makes it possible for a young person to give priority to certain actions among the numerous proposals facing him/her.

Similarly, nowadays we note also the lack of projects and visions of the future. This is part of the loss that contemporary society is suffering from today. This is where the Kingdom of God can form **a passionate horizon** for youth for whom not many things are clear. The Kingdom of God is part of our vision of the future, a vision we wish to help to build.

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Faced with the lack of commitment, we seek the formation of **passionate young people**, who have a dream for their world, their country, their city, their friends and their family. This means that, of necessity, they need to be formed in the generosity that seeks God's will and wishes to accomplish it. It is not enough to know about the Kingdom; it has to be desired passionately. It is also necessary to reflect on the pedagogy of affections, so that the heart is set on what is really worthwhile. Young people urgently need a spirituality that can direct their affections to love what God loves.

Finally, we need to remember that the Christian youth of tomorrow must have the capacity to give significance and value to their interior world as the place where God speaks to the heart. It is therefore necessary to have **wisdom** in its fullest sense: to savour and taste what is happening in their life, to become conscious of the presence of the Spirit, of the place God occupies in the life of each man or woman and in the history of the Church. In the end, "it is not an abundance of knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul" (*SpEx. 2*); the only thing that fills the heart and permits us to be God's witnesses is the wisdom which allows us to deepen our experiences and make them become such and not mere anecdotes.

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¹ The percentage data are continuously taken from the 4th Survey of the National Youth Institute of Chile (INJUV, 2003)

² Puerto Montt is a city situated 1,100 kilometres south of Santiago, the capital of Chile.

³ Habermas, Jürgen. **Conocimiento e interés**. Taurus, Madrid, 1982. This vision is completed in his second work **Teoría de la acción comunicativa**. Taurus, Madrid, 1987 (2 volumes). This scheme of analysis has been proposed by Sergio Silva, SS. CC. in his course on Fundamental Theology at the PUC in Chile.

⁴ I owe this reflection to the report of Luis García-Huidobro, S.J.

⁵ The data of this section come from the study of the Centre for Sociocultural Investigations (CISOC): *Jóvenes: orientaciones valóricas, religión e Iglesia Católica*. [*Youth: value orientations, religion and the Catholic Church*] (2005).

⁶ Borgmann, Albert. *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (1984)

⁷ Nowadays we stress three aspects that define **human maturity**: 1) being **reasonable** and, therefore, capable of dialoguing with arguments in the quest for truth; 2) the **freedom** which makes decisions and is capable of assuming responsibly their consequences, because he/she understands that every individual act always influences others in the social body; 3) **empathy** which leads to placing others as the centre of one's own life (adult love).