

Teens have to adapt to cell phone-free retreats

Teens don't talk – they message.

Their increasing dependence on electronic communication challenges retreat directors.

"This is my opinion, and it's merely my opinion," said Father Martin S. Nocchi, director of the O'Dwyer Retreat House in Sparks, which offers retreats for about 8,000 teens each year, "technology is great, but for many young people it's a life. They're not using the Internet the way it was intended to be used. It's broken down the ability to be able to communicate person to person."

It's an adjustment for today's teens, but retreats are cell phone and Internet free.

"Retreats try to do the basics of finding quiet and silence in their lives," Father Nocchi said. "They're put in the position where they have no other choice; they're put in the position where they're going to have to try silence without all the other things."

While they're technologically savvy, today's teens don't know the basics of their faith – and retreats give them a chance to ask those questions.

"You have to just get down on their level," Father Nocchi said. "Many of them don't have the basic faith framework structure like we had growing up – the Baltimore Catechism."

Kids ask the most basic of questions, such as who is God. But unlike their elders, teens today don't fear going to hell, and they can't be forced to accept tenets of the faith.

"Growing up you were never allowed to ask the questions," Father Nocchi said. "We were told, 'This is the way it is.' I allow them to ask the questions because the questions are real."

Today's teens, too, are much more aware of the world around them, "and that will change the way they look at faith," said Father Nocchi.

Retreat directors talk bluntly to the kids about the issues they know will come up in confession: sex, drugs, alcohol, boyfriend and girlfriend relationships, parents.

Today's teens face greater pressure, some of which they perceive as coming from their parents. Teens really open up in confession because they know it won't be repeated.

"They've been made into adults before they're adults, and it's the pressure that's put on them - or they perceive it's put on them - by parents," Father Nocchi said. With work, school, sports and activities, teens are pulled in many directions. Father Nocchi muses that perhaps he was sheltered by growing up in a family of six, which meant he could only do one thing a time, making life simpler.

At the same time, teens are trying to discern where their gifts are and how they can live that out.

"You can't commit to 5,000 things because then you're not committed to anything," he added.

Some things about teenagers haven't changed: They still fear peer pressure, reluctant to appear different to their friends.

"It's hard to bypass when you have a group of 40 high school seniors," Father Nocchi said, adding that the answer is to break them down into small groups. Teens do respect that what is said on retreat is confidential. "There's supposed to be that level of confidence and trust," Father Nocchi said.

And teens still think they're the only person to ever struggle.

"They think it's the end of the world and it's their problem, but ask any parent," said Father Nocchi, who knows teens don't really believe their parents were ever the same age, with some of the same struggles.