

Introducing *Kenosis*

In each of these hour-long sessions, you will be leading young people through what might, at first, seem like a confusing enhancer of joy – *kenosis*. While *kenosis* forms the background out of which these sessions emerge, each lesson draws on a different aspect or way of practicing *kenosis*. Philippians 2 further lays the foundation for these sessions, which will explore the self-giving nature of God’s love as young people seek to imitate God in kenotic fashion.

Jesus Christ, as always, shows us primarily what the kenotic love of God looks like. As St. Paul writes, “Although he was God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but rather emptied himself (*kenosis*), taking on the form of a servant, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” *Kenosis*, thus defined, is a matter of self-emptying, of diminishing whatever one feels establishes one’s own life as meaningful and valuable. In a culture that praises authentic self-expression (see Twitter and Facebook feeds) and self-actualization, it is understandable why *kenosis* is something that runs counterintuitive to our sense of what an enhancer of joy and flourishing looks like. Generally speaking, we want what we want when we want it, and not getting it distresses us.

Looking at Christ, however, we see that the cross and joy do not stand apart from one another, but rather, it is for the sake of joy that Christ endures the cross (Heb. 12:2). So, too, it is not by avoiding the cross that young people will find the path to joy, but rather it is by taking up the cross in imitation of Christ as they follow him daily that they come to be united with Christ and so become full participants in His life and in His joy.

As we speak of Christ’s cross, however, it is important to bear in mind not only its unique role in the Christian faith, but also its educative role for all Christians. It is true that only Christ’s cross redeems us from sin and death, but ultimately, the cross is the very thing that all Christians are called to carry as disciples of the crucified Lord. So what do we mean when we speak of taking up the cross?

When we look at Christ, we see a man whose entire earthly life was lived in faithfulness to God and lived on behalf of others. He lived, breathed, and died in service to God, but it was a life of service that was *for* others. Those who are baptized into Christ, who are invited to take up the cross themselves, are also invited into a life of continually dying to themselves in order that they might live for God and others. To be in the image and likeness of God, which is realized and expressed fully in Christ, is to be a human being who carries the cross. Living for God and others is the true path toward being fully human as revealed in Christ, and it is the fullness of joy and human flourishing to become like Christ, who is Himself the true human being. To become like Christ is to become truly human.

As expressed above, our culture is one that lauds living for oneself, being truly authentic, particularly when it comes to self-expression. If one feels something, they should say it. If one wants something, they should get it. To this end, we live in a culture that prizes tolerance above all other things, for in an Age of Authenticity¹, who can say what makes one happy except for the individual himself or herself. Indeed, this manner of life – that of pursuing happiness – has become the normative vision of human flourishing

¹ A term coined by Charles Taylor but popularized by James K.A. Smith in his work, *How (Not) To Be Secular*.

in the minds of many youth and young adults. It has been oft cited, but as Christian Smith and his colleagues discovered in the National Study of Youth and Religion, many young people believe that “the goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.” The cultural sign of human flourishing is to be happy. This is a far cry from that of the traditional Christian promise of the life and joy of resurrection found on the other side of crucifixion.

For youth to experience joy and true human flourishing, they must participate in Christ’s own life, as he himself alone is the fullness of what it is to be truly human. This life, however, is found through death, and it is a fullness of life that must be “put on” through the continual “putting off” of the self. It is to this end that the enhancer of joy, *kenosis*, is directed. *Kenosis* is directed toward “putting off” the old creation and putting on the new as it is revealed in Christ, the one who shows us what it is to be God by the way He dies as a human being.² And it is to this end that each of these sessions is also directed: toward teaching young people how to die to themselves as they live for God and others.

Each session focuses on a different practice that falls under the larger umbrella of *kenosis*. By putting focus on one particular practice, it is our hope that youth will learn that a life of following Christ is a life of continual effort to deny the self, to take up the cross, and to walk in imitation of the one who shows us what it is to live as a truly human being. In each session, you will find time to contemplate the person of Christ through the ancient Christian practice known as “The Jesus Prayer.” It is a simple prayer that contemplates Christ and one’s relationship to Him: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” The purpose of instilling this prayer in the heart of young people is to bring them into regular encounter with the crucified Lord. Nothing can be accomplished without God’s grace, and it is only by beginning in God’s presence that any of the sessions will have effect, and it is toward each session now that we turn our attention.

The first session is intended to teach young people how the practice of confession of sins is an essential act of self-denial and taking up the cross. This practice takes various shapes in different traditions of Christianity. Sometimes it is extremely formal as in the case of confessing in the presence of an ordained priest, while at other times it takes the form of confessing to a spiritual brother or sister, often considered something akin to “accountability.” Either way, this practice of opening the heart and confessing spiritual missteps is about taking power away from the false self that so many of us construct to keep ourselves safe in a world that prizes “authenticity,” which often looks like exciting vacations and stellar report cards.

Our youth live in a world of social media where people continually reveal the most appealing aspects of their lives. It has been well documented in several places that our use of social media drives us to believe that others are doing better than we are. And so, our response is often to level up on our social media sharing, posting pictures of the cool vacation we took or the amazingly beautiful dessert in which we just partook. Either way, however, social media practices encourage youth to “express themselves.” But this self-expression is almost always about self-projection, about revealing only those parts of ourselves that are deemed worthy, that are acceptable and enviable – those parts of us that are “enough.”

² See John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*.

Meanwhile, under the surface, youth (and adults) harbor questions about their own value, about whether or not they are worthy in the eyes of others because of the many things that we *don't* share with others. Confession of sins, however, exercises the cultural need to “express oneself” while also positioning self-expression within the spiritual practice of Christian tradition. Expressing one’s failings, one’s longings, one’s fear and sin is, after all, just as authentic as expressing oneself through fashion and 280-character tweets. By encouraging youth to express their failings, their sins, we co-opt the cultural drive toward authenticity while also directing it toward Christ, toward a vision of what it is to be truly human. We encourage young people to let their visions of their false selves die while opening the door to true life, to true relationship with Christ, the one who knows their sins and failings, who knows the true desires of their hearts. Once the false self, which has been bolstered through practices of self-expression, is effectively crucified through confession, this opens the door to establishing an ongoing practice of self-denial, of taking up the cross and living for God.

The second session has everything to do with moving away from the self and attending to the needs and longings of others, particularly our brothers and sisters in Christ. Too often, young people live atomized lives, feeling separated from others without seeing that their unity in Christ is a deep spiritual reality. Being a Christian is not simply an individual decision that one makes, but rather it is about membership to a larger Body, the Church, in which each of us has access to one another through Christ in prayer. This session aims to open an understanding of prayer as individual requesting in order to move it into a mode of shared life. By focusing on the practice of intercessory prayer, the hope is that young people begin to see that life is not simply about oneself, but it is about living in communion with others.

In this communion with others, we invite youth to contemplate the reality that sometimes they don’t have the strength to pray for themselves, but rather that they may need to turn to others in order to be lifted up in prayer, to have someone pray *for* them. So, too, each young person will come to recognize that their membership in the larger Body of Christ means that they, too, must at times be the load-bearing recipient of another’s pain and spiritual paralysis. As youth begin to walk into this reality, knowing that their union in Christ opens the relational space between them and their brothers and sisters in Christ, this also allows youth to come to understand their lives as existing not only for themselves, but for the sake of those around them.

The third session focuses on service to the larger world, of understanding that resistance to walk into the world largely has to do with our own fear. Reading the news, it is easy to see the destruction and the confusion that tear the world apart, and in fear, we begin to believe that our lives will somehow be complete if we can bolster and protect ourselves against the onslaught of a chaotic world. In contrast, however, it is in the person of Christ that we see that the love of God bids us to walk bravely into a world that lies in darkness and to give ourselves in service to and for it. The Christian is the one who bears the pain and death of the world with confidence in a God who raises the dead.

In this session, youth will come to grapple with their own fears as they look into the world, to put them aside, and to step directly into pain of the world, to bear it as they trust in God. By looking toward God’s coming Kingdom, youth will find a foundation of upon which they can stand as they look at the pain of the world without being overwhelmed by it. By trusting in God’s Kingdom, youth can begin to see how cultural

visions of “the good life” are often predicated by fear of death in all its forms, rather than being rooted in the love of God which led Christ to give Himself for the life of the world. Youth here will be encouraged to look beyond themselves and to see the world around them for what it is, and to offer it to the Lord in prayer.

Each of these sessions is thus aimed at a specific practice to walk young people into the kenotic way of life modeled by Christ. Kenosis bids us to put ourselves aside, to step into the place of others, and to live a life of a service to others. The fear of death traps us into thinking that we need to make the most out of *our lives*, while the cross of Christ shows us that the love of God is stronger than death. We need not be afraid of death because death is defeated through the cross of Christ, and as we take up the cross in our own lives, so, too, do we become participants in Christ’s life now. We enter into a manner of life that cannot be touched by death because it is entered *through* death, willingly putting oneself aside and living for God and others.

It is our hope and prayer that participating in these sessions will bolster your youth’s confidence in God whose life is revealed in Christ. We hope that these practices will encourage your youth to empty themselves that they might be filled with Christ and live in service to His Kingdom as they bear the burdens of those around them.