

If you would like to support this powerful program for endangered youth on our Mexican-American border, please send your donation of any amount to the Claretian Curia in San Gabriel, California:



BARRIOS UNIDOS EN CRISTO ~ a Claretian Project in the City of Juarez

March 2009

Social Condition of Barrio Youth

As in most underdeveloped countries, the situation of Latin American youth is heterogeneous: urban, rural, indigenous, coastal, black, mestizo, worker, student, unemployed and so on. It is not acceptable to view youth only as a social sector which society, as a system, is training for a productive adult life.

The securities and insecurities of young people are socially, economically and culturally determined. The situation of middle and upper class youth who have economic possibilities and a certain measure of security in the future is distinct from that of the sons and daughters of the lower class whose expectations of the future are very different.

Changes produced by reduced circumstances influence youth in their cohesion and view of the future. For example, education does not automatically lead to a better future and diminishes its social value. Young people find steady employment with difficulty and cannot count on enough money to start businesses of their own, which is unsettling.

Young people develop uneasiness and lost horizons concerning the future and see no goal in the future which is possible to meet. This loss of perspective leads to attitudes and behavior that is limited to ones immediate daily needs. Young people are the present, but a very sad one because of the indifference of others.

Thus the importance of understanding the environment of young people, not only as an identity shared by a whole group of individuals who find themselves at a certain age level, but as the

multiplicity of elements of various kinds which youth share in a certain moment of history, and in a specific place, that produces their concrete condition as young people.

In modern society the time period during which a young person is no longer fully integrated into his family and does not yet form part of society as an adult is ever greater. This stage needs systems of relationship that allow them to maintain emotional security and give them the possibility of initiating new relationships. In such a situation the function of the peer group is gaining importance and the power of friends and of the gang is ever greater in almost every corner of our parish.

The group of friends is taking the place of the family, and parents seem more and more distant. The micro system of the family barely makes economic survival possible; nonetheless close relationships and basic value systems are still being formed in spite of it. It seems clear that adolescents and young adults are especially sensitive to their situation in the world. And for this they also depend on the opinions of others, and seek by countless means to construct their own status in relation to others; thus their tireless devotion to appearance, clothes, fashion and fads, and their continuous effort to identify themselves. In this context bands and urban gangs can provide keys and models for determining their own forms of expression.

There are a series of causes that tend to generate movements based on frustration and youthful protest: police and economic bureaucracy, the depersonalization of city life, the increasingly rigid systems of production, a society that is more and more materialistic and focused on consumerism, luxury and comfort, education as a system for producing professionals, the false morality at certain levels of society....

So there are groups of young adults who do not want to integrate themselves into the culture and society established by their elders, and who choose to form fringe associations in order to protect their own counterculture. The situation of young adult groups today, who feel marginalized or silenced by the progress of society and the unsatisfactory prospect it offers, might explain the rapid increase of this type of group.

On the other hand, we may also discover that we are in the presence of a very emotionally fragile generation of young people as a consequence of family dysfunction. It is possible to imagine a mosaic of youth cultures which require adequate attention to flourish and develop. Unfortunately for various reasons the family is not doing what it used to be able to do in former times for the human development of its children.

In the context in which the present parish project unfolds, it is possible to verify a very strong incidence of drug addiction and drug trafficking among young people. This results in many illegal activities at the very heart of the home and settlement in which they live, and in disturbances that result in jail time for many of those involved, who unfortunately are adolescents and youth.

The whole environment is full of improper behavior behind the wheel. Witness, for example, the famous sudden starts by savages who think of the streets as speedways for race cars on which they turn into beasts even without being under the influence of drugs. Addiction also proves the presence of gangs who mark their territory and defend the control of it with violence. Insecurity

and acts of vengeance between gangs and neighborhoods abound.

We live in a city where young people suffer greatly from a lack of affection. In general there is a large vacuum in their hearts because the mother and father normally work and leave them alone for a large part of the day without any supervision. As a result they are growing up deprived in every way.

Robbery is the order of the day, and not even the Church is free of those who like what is not theirs. There are continuous violent attacks at the hands of gang members. Many even steal from their own families because they are involved in drug use.

Family disintegration is severe: single mothers, second marriages, free unions with little stability, abusive step-parents, sexual harassment, physical abuse, rape, children who are not of the same parents, near abandonment or long absences, above all of spouses such as those who stay and put down roots in the USA...many couples are not married by the Church. The Department of Child Care removes the children of a good number of parents because of abandonment and child neglect. A large number are left alone for a good part of the day and night.

Night life, diversions, shows and entertainment are a big thing because the city of Juarez is a border town and growing rapidly as a city even though some of its population is mobile. Our city is historically burdened with the dead weight of a bad name because Fort Bliss is here with its large population of American soldiers on account of El Paso's strategic position in US plans of attack and defense. For amusement the soldiers and a youthful population still under the age of 21, as well as the youth of Juarez, pack the discos, nightclubs, bars and dens of iniquity. Various levels of prostitution proliferate. There is notable consumption and abuse of alcohol.

There is much indifference to religion on the part of parents, and on the part of their children as a consequence. Many have not even received a minimum of religious instruction and many are lacking their sacraments. We do not really have a structured pastoral program for young people. Nonetheless we do find traces of youth groups in some chapels, and these are working little by little to see that there are youth groups in every chapel and center of evangelization to give life to these centers.

One Confirmation group which began the first Sunday of February is attended by approximately 130 young people. The Youth Care Center is trying to revive itself by offering to give formation to church choirs and other parish groups.

To meet the needs of our youth, the idea came to birth of working with them and for them to develop a project to be called "Barrios Unidos en Cristo/ Neighborhoods United in Christ" in which people who are capable of confronting these situations of drug addiction, gangsterism and violence would help us to do something effective.

What is Neighborhoods United in Christ? It is a Catholic movement that offers help to all who are going through a critical moment in their life in counteracting such things as: membership in gangs, drug addiction, prostitution, alcoholism, or suicidal tendencies. It creates support networks for this by means of the communities of United Neighborhoods. The Neighborhood Mission is: to offer viable alternatives to persons who live in critical or vulnerable situations by means of the "New

Evangelization” so that they can achieve a better quality of human life on the family, social, scholastic and spiritual level.

Its Vision is to be a self-directed pro-active institution that promotes a culture of healthy living by the prevention of addictions, and through the formation of values, conversion to the gospel, and rehabilitation, in order to reduce the amount of self-destructive behavior and to recover and integrate the individual back into society.

Please contact Fr. John Raab at Mission Partnership (323-254-0510) for more information.