

Book of timely prayer services is built around overlapping seasons of the teenage year

By Jay Nies

Shifting seasons, both sacred and secular, can bring restless fatigue, especially for young people at their peak of intensity.

They need effective ways to give it all to God and have Him dole it back to them in right measure.

That is the purpose of *Let Us Go Forth!*, a book containing 20 timely, relevant prayer services for teenagers, for use in liturgical, school and family occasions.

The 80-page book is available from Twenty-third Publications (bit.ly/letusgoforth).

Renowned Catholic performers and youth evangelizers Shannon Cerneka and Orin Johnson of Oddwalk Ministries built each of the prayer services around seasonal milestones and timely experiences.

"In this book you will find several topics, each a particular facet of our Catholic faith, fleshed out in prayer services," they wrote in the introduction. "Each has elements of Scripture, music and fun and engaging reflection activities."

They said the prayer services are especially useful for the beginning or ending of school days, all-school assemblies, religious education classes, youth ministry events or family gatherings.

They believe the Scripture passages they chose challenge and honor the deep feelings and questions that young people have, while each of the engaging activities helps participants explore a facet of the faith in greater depth.

The authors drew much of the material from successful retreats and youth days of recollection they have given.

Their main objective is for young people to continue growing in faith and in their relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

"Those are lofty things for a 20-minute prayer service," Mr. Cerneka, music teacher at St. Peter School in Fulton and youth minister for St. Peter parish, acknowledged. "But our hope for anything is to help draw them closer to Jesus and the Church."

"Thoughtful and engaging"

Let Us Go Forth! has been racking up accolades since it went to press last summer.

"High school teachers out there, you are going to love this," said Ann Garrido, a distinguished author and a professor of homiletics and catechesis at Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis.

Joan C. Weber, national director of the Young Neighbors in Action summer service retreat, called it "an incredible book of prayer services for teens."

"These are great for youth or campus ministry," she stated.

Well-known youth performer and evangelizer Jesse Manibusan called *Let Us Go Forth!* "a straightforward, user-friendly and effective way to better reach out to the young Church in a thoughtful, engaging and inspiring way."

He encouraged fellow youth ministers to make this a part of their “go-to” resources.

Times and seasons

Mr. Cerneka said Catholic youth ministers have access to numerous useful and helpful prayer resources.

“But I think this one is unique because it not only covers different parts of the Church year but also school-related things like the beginning of the school year, Grandparents Day, exam time, graduation — even down to something like a tragedy, something that strikes at the heart of the community of teenagers,” he said.

That often chaotic convergence of civil, school and liturgical cycles points to where Catholic young people actually live.

“I don’t know if I’ve seen a resource that acknowledges that there are multiple tracks going on in the life of a teenager and gives them an opportunity to pray through them together,” he said.

Mr. Johnson, who is director of music ministries at Ss. Joachim and Ann parish in St. Charles, said he and Mr. Cerneka also set out to challenge young people with the prayer services, offering a higher level of intellect and maturity than many teens may be used to.

He said the reflection activities in each prayer service are intentionally interactive.

“They really allow the participants to become part of the prayer service — to have things to say — and more importantly, to do things with each other to break open whatever facet of our faith that prayer service is about,” he said.

"I think that level of engagement is unique and needed, especially with teenagers," he said.

Transformed through prayer

For the most part, the authors set their most recognizable tool for setting young people at ease — humor — aside for this project.

But that doesn't mean the Oddwalk elements of creativity, concern and joy are ever far from sight.

"We went into this with the same objective of engaging young people and trying everything we could think of to draw them into the prayer," said Mr. Cerneka.

He said the key is to help young people want to participate in the prayers and become comfortable with doing so.

Mr. Johnson said another Oddwalk hallmark shines through every facet of *Let Us Go Forth!*, including the title.

"There is an insistence on activity," he said. "Our context is people filled with the Holy Spirit, being sent out to evangelize. Whether we're doing a keynote at a youth gathering or accompanying a Mass that has a similar dismissal, we talk about taking the faith we've been exploring together out and doing something with it."

He asserted that by setting aside regular time for structured prayer, parents and teachers can help young people realize that prayer must be part of the rhythm of everyday life.

"It's never a one-and-done thing," he said. "Your life keeps changing. Whatever these prayers and Scripture passages mean for you today could

be 180 degrees different a year from now, based on whatever is going on in your life.”

Just like the cycle of readings for Sunday and weekday Mass, repetition is helpful.

“We pray on a cycle, but our lives are constantly moving ahead, so the circle becomes a spiral,” he said.



Orin Johnson and Shannon Cerneka lead a group of young people in song and prayer. “Let Us Go Forth!” their collection of timely prayer services for teens, incorporates some of the prayer experiences they found to be helpful on retreats and days of recollection they have led.
PUBLICITY PHOTO