



In her recently published book “The Spiritual Child,” Dr. Lisa Miller wrote, “The research shows that children who have a positive, active relationship to spirituality are: 40 percent less likely to use and abuse substances, 60 percent less likely to be depressed as teenagers, 80 percent less likely to have dangerous or unprotected sex, and are more likely to have positive markers for thriving and high levels of academic success.”

Having run over 20 youth programs in the greater Washington, D.C., area for 19 years, I am not surprised by these findings.

Kids have anxieties, insecurities, fears, and deep angst about the future and they feel tremendous pressure to succeed, as well as to be respected and accepted by their peers. Navigating through these murky waters can be overwhelming, and having God in the boat certainly makes it more manageable.

Several years ago, I observed a fifth-grade boy at an after-school Leadership Training Program in McLean, Virginia. The donuts and Gatorade had just arrived, and this boy immediately rushed over to start pouring drinks from the cooler for the 30 boys forming a line.

He proceeded to do so for the next 10 minutes, and when the quality donuts had all been chosen, he quietly took a plain donut from one of the near-empty boxes. He then grabbed a garbage bag and started collecting the cups and napkins that the boys were still holding in their donut-stained hands.

Later, I asked this young man how his spiritual life was developing. Smiling, he said, “Fr. Michael, I am reading a little passage from the Gospels every night and this has really helped me out. I used to be focused on having fun, but it seems like Jesus spent all of His time and energy serving others. So I am trying to be less selfish.”

Yes, this boy was by far the happiest kid in the school, possibly the top student — and anxiety was the furthest thing from his soul.

Fr. Lorenzo Gomez, LC, our chaplain at Brother Rice High School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, had formed an ECYD/Regnum Christi youth group, of which I was part, from seventh grade through my years at Michigan State University. He introduced me to Jesus Christ as my absolute best friend and constant companion.

Fr. Gomez encouraged us to strive for excellence in everything, to fan our gifts into a flame (2 Timothy 1:6), so as to not slow down God's plan over our lives.

God deserved the best from us, and our capacity to influence others would be proportional to our efforts in the classroom, on the sports field and especially in the area of charity and morality. With Christ at my side, I have never felt alone and I cannot think of a more noble and powerful motivation than to work hard in everything for His greater glory.

As a priest, I am more concerned with kids heading down a path of holiness and toward heaven than getting into Harvard.

Success is important, but the intentionality behind the effort carries much more weight. A "spiritual child" is a fairly generic term, open to a lot of different interpretations. God has become man and He wants to be a part of your children's life and your family's day-to-day life. Only He can satisfy the deepest yearnings of the heart — only He can bring temporal and eternal happiness.

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