What Do Young Catholic Women Want (from Their Church)?
Reflections and Recommendations

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In this article Hinsdale explores the insights of young Catholic women for today’s church.

When I hear the query “what do women want?” my imagination tends to conjure up images of exasperated males in wacky sitcoms and movies complaining about their wives and girlfriends. But, just for fun, before beginning this essay, I rented the romantic comedy What Women Want (Paramount Pictures, 2000) to see if any new, more enlightened, answers might be emerging from contemporary popular culture.

In this movie Mel Gibson plays an egotistical, self-centered, chauvinist named Nick, whose ad agency boss (Alan Alda) passes him over for a promotion and hires Darcy (Helen Hunt), a hotshot woman ad exec from a competitor agency. As a result of a freak accident in which he is almost electrocuted, Nick discovers that he suddenly has developed the amazing ability to read women’s minds—a “gift” that he soon wishes he hadn’t received.

With his newfound ability Nick discovers what other women, including his own daughter, really think of him. Though they pretend to like him, his women coworkers actually loathe his macho-man demeanor (or, as one reviewer termed it, his

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“Cro-Magnon masculinity”) (Ebert). His daughter, Alex, finds him so self-absorbed and distant that she refers to him as “Uncle Dad.” Unfortunately, Nick’s revelations don’t lead immediately to a miraculous conversion. However, by the movie’s end, chastened by his total disregard of a suicidal female file clerk, Nick reveals to Darcy (with whom he has become totally smitten) that he has used his “secret powers” to steal her ideas and regain favor with his boss. Alas, this confession causes him to lose his powers, but not the new insight he has gained; namely, that “what women really want” is to be listened to.

While I wasn’t tremendously heartened by this recent cinematic attempt to address “what women want,” it did cause me to wonder, what if this query were posed in a different context, with a more defined demographic, i.e., “What do young Catholic women want from their church?” Over the last dozen years a spate of insightful books and articles concerning young Catholics have appeared. Some of these are sociological studies (D’Antonio, et. al., 2001; Hoge, et. al., 2001; Ryan, 2006; Wittberg, 2006; Hoge, 2006); others are reflections by theologians and campus ministers who deal with Catholic undergraduates (Bacik, 2004; Cavadini, 2006; Hinsdale, 2004; Portier, 2004; Rausch, 2006). These works are useful for charting the concerns and challenges facing the Catholic Church in the third millennium; however, few of them deal specifically with females and even fewer examine the views of young Catholic women.

In the late 1980s, during the nation-wide consultations that were being held on the drafts of the U.S. bishops so-called “women’s pastoral,” I asked some of the young Catholic undergraduate women whom I was teaching at the time whether they thought the responses to the drafts were relevant to their own lives (Hinsdale, 1990). Now, nearly twenty years later, I decided to consult them again. Ideally, of course, young Catholic women themselves ought to be writing the articles that seek to know “what do young Catholic women want?” Two recent books to which I refer later in this article, Dori Grinenko Baker’s Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women (2005) and Claire Bischoff and Rachel Gaffron’s My Red Couch and Other Stories on Seeking a Feminist Faith (2005), approach this question from a Christian perspective. But there isn’t much available from a specifically Roman Catholic perspective. Liz Kelley’s May Crowning, Mass, and Merton: And Other Reasons I Love Being Catholic (2006) offers vignettes from a thirty-something “evangelical” Catholic. While it is great as a discussion catalyst, I fear most of my undergraduate students would find her book somewhat removed from their experience. Fortunately, the lacuna regarding writing by young Catholic women
soon will be remedied through the endeavors of two Catholic women divinity students at Harvard who are compiling an anthology of writing by and about young Catholic women (Dugan and Owens, 2007). In the meantime, perhaps some anecdotal learning from my own experience of some twenty-five years teaching Catholic women undergraduates and younger graduate theology and ministerial students will augment this lack.

**Shared Characteristics with “Millennials”**

In many respects the religious concerns that young Catholic women have correspond to the data on “millennials” (the generational category that refers to those born since 1982, thus covering most undergraduate and younger graduate students) gathered by the sociological studies mentioned above. Young American Catholic women, like their male counterparts, are embedded in the consumerism, materialism, and individualism that characterize American culture. Growing up in a postmodern culture of pluralism, their default position on many religious questions is “well, it works for me.” While such relativism may be disturbing to older Catholics, the positive side is that young Catholics, in general, tend to be very tolerant of different religious beliefs and marginalized persons. “Authenticity” is more important to most of them than orthodoxy. But they also have an aversion to the ideological issues that polarize the baby-boomer, Vatican II generation of Catholics. Despite their similarities with the general millennial population, however, it is important to stress that the same diversity one finds today in the U.S. Catholic Church at large also characterizes young Catholic women. Thus, Robin Ryan, C.P., of “Catholics on Call” notes, “there is no such thing as a simple profile of ‘the young adult Catholic’”—to which I would add: neither is there a “one-size-fits-all” young Catholic woman.

With that caveat, what can be said about young Catholic women’s expectations of the church? A few years ago theologian and veteran campus minister Fr. James Bacik formulated a typology of spiritualities characteristic of Catholic millennials (Bacik, 2004). Although his typology does not distinguish between men and women, it does provide a framework for considering the viewpoints of many of the young Catholic women whom I have taught and with whom I have worked.

**Types of Millennial Spirituality**

Bacik's seven categories of millennial spiritualities include the following: (1) *eclipsed* spirituality (those who have little interest in spiritual matters, though they self-identify as Catholic; they do not attend Mass and seldom pray because they are too busy; their spirituality is thus “eclipsed” by current concerns; (2) *private* spirituality (those who pursue their spiritual goals by reading, com-
muning with nature, but seldom participate in organized church activities; (3) ecumenical spirituality (those who regard themselves as “Christian” rather than Catholic; they have little institutional loyalty and would join another denomination if it better served their spiritual needs; (4) evangelical spirituality (those who speak easily about their faith; they are deeply convinced of the truth of Catholicism and are concerned about the “relativism” of postmodern culture; they are generally suspicious of the reforms of Vatican II); (5) sacramental spirituality (those who deeply appreciate the church’s liturgy and through regular participation in it, have a sense of God’s presence in their daily lives); (6) prophetic spirituality (those who are committed to working for justice and peace; they are concerned about eco-justice and persons marginalized by poverty, racism, sexism, and heterosexism); (7) communal spirituality (those who feel the need to associate with others who share their values; they enjoy worshipping with “kindred spirits” at Mass and participating in faith-sharing). Bacik cautions that these categories overlap and should not be regarded as rigid. Their value mainly lies in helping us to move us beyond the categorizations of “progressive,” “conservative” “liberal,” “reactionary,” etc., in speaking about the millennials.

I have encountered each of these types of spirituality among young Catholic women undergraduates. Those who evidence an eclipsed, private, or ecumenical spirituality are perhaps the least likely to express any expectations from the Catholic Church—a characteristic that fits well with the waning interest and investment in the church as an institution that characterize many millennials (Rausch, 4–9). Those who reflect an evangelical, sacramental, prophetic, or communal spirituality tend to be more involved in the church and therefore are more likely to voice expectations of the institution, especially of its official ministers. Yet, over and over again, the most frequently repeated answer to the question I posed—“what do you, as a woman, want/expect from your church?”—greatly resembles the concluding insight of the Mel Gibson/Helen Hunt film. Put simply, what many young Catholic women seem to be saying is: they are longing to be listened to.

“Longing to be listened to”

Whether their spirituality is “evangelical” or “prophetic,” both the young Catholic women undergraduates and the women ministerial students whom
I know are united in one desire: they want the pope and the bishops, pastors, youth and campus ministers, professors, parents, CCD teachers, and especially their male colleagues to take them seriously. Although young Catholic women may differ in terms of specific issues and concerns regarding the church, those who still care are most anxious to be given “a hearing.” And, I have discovered, they are not reticent about giving advice to newly ordained priests and pastoral ministers of both sexes. But, they also want to be asked.

Given the anecdotal nature of what I share here, as well as the limitation of the particular ethnic and socioeconomic sphere in which I have worked, one of my first recommendations is that it would be extremely advantageous for social scientists who study Catholicism (i.e., CARA, the Life Cycle Institute, the National Opinion Research Center) to specifically survey young Catholic women from a variety of ethnic and economic classes regarding their experience of church. It is astonishing how little research on young Catholics has attended to gender differences. For example, there is only a slight mention of the issue of gender, under the broad, umbrella heading of “multicultural differences,” in Robert McCarty’s otherwise excellent book, *The Vision of Catholic Youth Ministry* (Yu-Phelps, 2005, 188, 192).

Today millennial young Catholic women arrive at college believing that sex discrimination was a problem with which their mother’s generation had to deal—but that now has been largely overcome. Very few of them would want to be called “feminists” (thanks to Rush Limbaugh and others’ caricature of feminists as “feminazis,” the term has become the new “F” word), at least certainly not during their first few years in college. I always encounter a few who talk about having been denied the chance to be altar servers in their parish or, when having been given that opportunity, can recall painful memories of not being allowed to serve for confirmation when the bishop came. However, the previously all-male institutions in which I have taught have enough vestigial gender bias that by the end of their first or second year these same young women begin to notice subtle discrimination.

In most coeducational Catholic colleges and universities women now make up more than half the student body. However, in previously all-male institutions the president, provost, or dean’s post is still held by a man and there continues to be a lack of sufficient female role models in academic and campus ministry leadership positions. Even though today the majority of lay ecclesial ministers are women—nearly 80 percent we are told (Allen, 2007)—women remain underrepresented in leadership roles in parishes and as professors in theology classrooms.
Despite the prohibition of women being admitted to Holy Orders in the Roman Catholic Church, I have not found that today’s students (both men and women!) have been persuaded by the church’s official arguments. And while I don’t find that vast numbers of women students want to be ordained, they do want to be taken seriously and treated as such. One woman student poignantly reminded me of this within a reflection on the importance of female role models:

Here we are blessed to have so many brilliant minds around us existing in bodies committed to serving God with compassionate hearts. We offer at least five masses every day, and because I receive so much from daily Mass, I try to attend as often as possible. I find it distressing that most males who study theology or attend daily Mass are approached at some point by a Jesuit offering spiritual direction or wishing to talk about vocation, whereas I will graduate without one such experience. I have been very lucky to take so many classes taught by leaders in the field of theology, but they have been mostly male. The female professors I have had the pleasure of studying with are phenomenal, but they are so much fewer in number than the males. It is clear to me that the female students of Boston College would benefit so greatly from the presence of female priests as role models, spiritual directors and mentors. (Boston College female theology major, class of 2005)

Although the role of theologian in the church is increasingly becoming a lay vocation, women still constitute a minority within the theological academy where men outnumber women 3 to 1 (Hinsdale, 2006). It is news to many undergraduates that women haven’t always been able to become theologians. While some commentators note (and fear!) “the feminization” of ministry as a result of the increasing number of women lay ecclesial ministers, it is still “a man’s world” among professional, academic theologians.

“Where ‘the girls’ are . . .”

If women are to be listened to and taken seriously then those who minister in the church first of all need to know how to find them. Like their male counterparts, more and more young Catholic women are voicing their views about what they want and expect from the church and society electronically: on blogs and in social networking “communities” such as Facebook and MySpace. Young adult blogs such as the Paulist’s Busted Halo (BustedHalo.com) or “Googling God” (googlinggod.blogspot.com) created by BustedHalo’s cofounder, Mike Hayes, provide good introductions to how young people see the church today. There is now even a “Busted Halo Show” on Sirius radio, hosted by Fr. Dave Dywer, C.S.P. Though the creators of these blogs are male, they do include women’s viewpoints,
such as Donna Freitas’ recent post on “The Contemporary Christa: Madonna and feminist theology live on stage.”

Blogs expressing young Catholic women’s concerns are rarer, but they do exist. Amy Wellborn’s “Open Book” (amywellborn.typepad.com) caters more to “evangelical” Catholic millennials, and a host of women divinity-student blogs express “prophetic” and “communal” millennial sentiments. Among the latter “A Traveling Theologian” (guarabamba.blogspot.com), who describes herself as a woman “studying at a Jesuit seminary savvy trying to live authentically in the tension between the First World and the Third World”; Jen Owens and Kate Dugan’s “Young Women and Catholicism”: (youngwomenandcatholicism.blogspot.com) and “Theologienne” (theologienne.blogspot.com). There is also a growing trend among younger, vowed women in the thirty-something age range to keep blogs. Both Susan Rose Francois, a novice in the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, who writes “Musings of a Discerning Woman” (actjustly.blogspot.com) and Julie Vieira, I.H.M., creator of “A Nun’s Life” (anunslife.org), entertain questions from Catholic and non-Catholic “seekers” about religious life and Catholicism in general. Finally, of special interest to teachers and pastoral ministers working with young adults are the blogs produced by Mary Hess and Jane Redmont, two media-savvy Catholic theologians who are not “millennials” but are well attuned to women’s issues. Their respective blogs, are “Transegrities” (religioused.org/tensegrities) and “Acts of Hope” (actsofhope.blogspot.com).

**Girlfriend Theology**

Although Christians espouse the belief that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, the goodness (let along the divine imaging) of female embodiment has received a negative valuation in the history of Christianity. In her preface to Dori Baker’s marvelous book, *Girlfriend Theology*, Rosemary Radford Ruether recalls the experience of her own daughter learning to conform to the expectations of gender roles. As girls become “young ladies,” she notes, they learn that they must “quiet down,” lower their voices, become pleasing to others, and no longer express their own feelings. Ruether acknowledges the heavy price that girls pay in learning the lessons of silence and submission: “Eating disorders, cutting, depression, even suicide are some of the more extreme ways that the stresses of (the) process of conformity express themselves” (Baker, 2005, vii).

As a way to address this problem, Dori Baker’s “girlfriend theology” advocates that young women create “female clusters” in which a girl begins by telling a story from her life. A circle of peers and mentors listen to her, attending to her feelings. Responses of awe, fear, grief, and horror, as well as those of comfort, safety, and contentment are allowed to arise and are shared. The next step is for the group to look for “glimpses of God.” Are there any images in her story that remind one of...
Scripture passages or other sacred stories that give life meaning? Are there echoes of the woman at the well? Teresa of Avila? Catherine of Siena? Hildegard of Bingen? Finally, the group asks how this girl’s story and its connection to other stories might be able to change the way we live (Baker, 2). Baker goes on to explain that

Girlfriend theology attempts to address the problems of silenced selves, missing voices, and girls in the footnotes. It does so by constructing a method of religious education that begins with the voices and life stories of adolescent girls. It engages those stories with the stories of adult women who have found voice, and translates the resources of women’s theological thought into the context of female adolescence. It is a meeting at the crossroads between adolescence and adulthood. It is a relational model of producing meaning. It moves from making meaning to taking action, as girls and adults emerge changed, able to identify new callings, and take steps toward unfolding vocation. (Baker, 17)

Along with many feminist, womanist, and mujerista theologians, Baker advocates that those who deal with young women should embrace “an embodied pedagogy.” Memories of old wounds can become embedded in family systems, which often have pernicious effects on female bodies. In response to their wombedness, some girls become dangerously thin, some become overweight, some turn to drugs and alcohol for escape, and some turn to sex for affirmation. Eating disorders, to use just one example, are often a “resistance response” to an imposed “cult of femininity.” While these disorders tend to be more common among affluent populations, equally disastrous is the life-threatening obesity that one finds among poor adolescent girls. Food, used to pacify anger and frustration, often becomes a last resort for poor girls suffering from racism, sexual abuse, poverty, emotional abuse, and heterosexism (Baker, 158). A question I often ask my students is, “how many times have you ever heard any of these issues addressed in a homily?” Of course, I already know what their answer will be. The point is: shouldn’t these also be issues that the church addresses?

Narratives by Young Catholic Women

Fortunately, there are resources being developed by young Catholic women themselves. Nicole Sotelo’s Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace (Sotelo, 2006) is excellent in this regard. My Red Couch, mentioned above, is a collection of essays by 24 young women and one man, ages 18–36, who tell their stories of seeking to reconcile their faith and their feminism (Bischoff and Gaffron, 2005). May Crowning, Mass, and Merton, also mentioned earlier, is
written from the perspective of a young “Catholic apologist” whose personal faith, she describes as being “a faith growing a little messy, a little rough and subversive around the edges” but nevertheless gives “a litany of reasons to love being Catholic” (Kelly, 2006).

Although these are anecdotal voices, I have found first-person narrative to be a powerful spiritual resource in working with young Catholic women. Jane Kopas, Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, and others who draw upon women poets and women writers of fiction and nonfiction do so in order dramatize the struggles and achievements of women. The life stories of how individual women have attempted to lead Christian lives in a church and world that is constructed by patriarchal ideology is a resource that can be enormously helpful to young women. So, in conclusion, let me give voice to one more of my woman students, a newly married woman in her late twenties who just received her master of divinity degree. I asked her, based upon her experience working in a parish, what advice would she give to newly ordained ministers regarding their collaboration with women in ministry:

I think most of us (women ministerial students) just want the chance to serve the church as “an equal” and be validated for our knowledge and experience. Sure, we have different perspectives, but ministry really should be ‘let’s do this together.’ When I was growing up youth were important in my parish. When young women become adult, a jolting shift takes place—at least, this was my experience—in how you are perceived. All of a sudden, if you want to remain involved in the church you are perceived as a threat, “one of those women.”

You want to know what I would like to tell newly ordained priests (or, really any priest, for that matter)? Well, I would say, that at Mass, his homily should really send us forth into the week. There should be something in it for me. The priest shouldn’t be getting more out of the Mass than the people attending. I want to say, “it’s not about you, Father!” Also, I want to say that about parish ministry in general, it’s not about doing it right, but doing it well! Finally, I wish priests and ministers in general didn’t think it was up to them to fix everything. Sometimes people just want to be listened to.

And, hopefully, what she is saying is something that we all are willing to listen to.

References


