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A New Age in the Church: Young Adults

It was not so long ago that the backbone of the lay leadership and activity of Catholic parish life consisted of people in their twenties and thirties. We did not call them young adults then. They were adults—earning a living and raising a family as participative members in church, schools, government and social communities. They often married soon after completing school and were parents by age twenty-five. Some of them were “veterans” of foreign wars before age thirty. Now we call them young adults. They stay in school longer; delay marriage, and are less certain about career paths. They may change jobs five or six times before their early retirement. And they are not as active in the Church as they once were.

The essays in this *New Theology Review* seek to address the Church’s ministry with this group of people we now call young adults. Why are so many absent from our churches? Why have so many young adults not found in our churches an answer to their spiritual hunger? There is an abundance of popular literature that indicates there is a deep spiritual hunger for meaning, definition, and direction in life. It is rooted in an inquisitiveness about what really matters. It reaches higher than career goals, as important as those can be, to seek a purpose in life more intrinsic than work or social status. Yet those same searchers and seekers acknowledge that they are having a hard time getting their spiritual needs met in institutional churches. How is it that so many young adults who are spiritually hungry are not finding the Catholic Church a place to be fed?

THE SELECTIVE PRESENCE OF YOUNG ADULTS

One young man observed recently that his connection to the Church is between two sacramental moments—confirmation and marriage—and that time in between is longer than ever before. Once they are married, young adults may not be in church until the baptism of their children. Once the water has been poured, they may not return until the onset of their child’s religious instruction five or six years later. In the past, even if the sacramental moments did not bring young adults in closer contact with the parish church, their progeny did. Young parents still may get involved in church life for the sake of the kids. “Today,” a young woman observed recently, “my parish deals with two groups of

people—school-age families and senior citizens.” Even if young adults are not as regular in their Sunday Mass attendance and even if their moments of return to the Church are infrequent, still Catholics continue to affiliate with the Church at the same rate they did thirty years ago. How can this be? What is the message that young adults are sending the Church by their selective presence?

The continued affiliation with the Catholic Church at a consistent rate and a new-found spiritual hunger among the late “boomers” and Generation X, should be understood as signs of hope. Young adults are not agnostic. They are not leaving the Catholic Church in droves. They may not practice their Catholic faith in conventional forms and their practice may not always be consistent, visible, and measurable. But maybe that is not their problem. Perhaps they have not found a lot to attach to in the Church if they are not a school-age parent or a senior citizen. If we listen to what they are saying, they also might reveal the strategy that needs to be employed in the Church as we enter a new millennium.

Young adults may state they are Catholic. They have been baptized but they are not registered in a parish. What some young adults discover is that registration in a parish seems to count more than membership in the Church through baptism. Just ask young adults what the first question they, their peers, siblings, or Catholic friends are asked, when it comes to approaching the Church to celebrate a marriage or baptize a child. “Are you registered?” If the answer is no, the availability of those sacraments diminishes quickly and dramatically. Comments we’ve heard recently include “My parish reminds me of a private (religious) country club. Take out your membership. Pay your dues. And only then you get the perks—sacraments”; “I called five churches today looking for a place to be married. Each and every one asked if I was registered. Not one asked if I was Catholic! No one ever bothered to ask if I was in love!” It is important to remember as we minister to young adults that their first moments of adult faith are often connected to preparing for marriage and passing on the tradition to the next generation. A warm, sincere, compassionate welcome at the time of marriage will do more to nurture an adult relationship with the Church than “I’m sorry. We only marry our registered parishioners.” It’s time to give the next generation experiential reasons to register.

CELEBRATING THEIR MOMENTS OF RETURN

The sacramental moment is a beginning, not an ending. The wedding begins a life of marriage in the Lord. Let it also begin an adult relationship with the local church by choice; not end that possibility by default. If forced to and if need be, they will register. They will attend all compulsory preparation programs. They will do it our way. But they

will not forget. Most will continue to check that Catholic box on the survey form. Yet when the “assembly” gathers to be in communion with one another and the Lord, many young adults do not feel in union with that assembly.

Perhaps the pastoral strategy needed here is to learn how to celebrate young adults’ moments of return. And a young adult moment of return is not limited to a return to the Church after time away. It is actually a return to the depth of life that happens in some very special and often times intense moments of the life journey. We have mentioned two moments of return already: marriage and baptism. There are at least three more in the young adult years of life—moments of sickness, death, and personal decision. Life can be very unfair. For young adults the unfairness and unevenness of life is seen in the sickness and disease they experience in themselves or among family or friends. These are profoundly spiritual moments when some hard questions and some profound realities need to be addressed. When the fact of death occurs in the passing of a family member or friend, death is no longer abstract and the mystery of life demands a response.

The fifth moment of return, though less visible than a marriage or baptism and less dramatic than sickness and death, is nonetheless just as real and equally important—moments of personal decision. Changing jobs or careers, making decisions about relationships, dating and marriage are more and more complex. These personal decisions are not entered into lightly. They are moments of meaning and personal identity. These moments, too, open many young adults to the spirit side of their lives. All five of these moments (and many more) can be assisted and celebrated not just by young adults’ relationship to the Church, but, maybe more importantly, by the Church’s relationship to them.

YOUNG ADULTS AND THE CHURCH: FOUR ASPECTS OF A NEW RELATIONSHIP

Effective ministry with young adults begins by transforming our attitudes toward them. They are not the enemy. They are not an indifferent, consumer-driven, narcissistic group, who care little for what the Church is all about. They are our people. They are God’s people. They are not the future of the Church. They are the present Church waiting to be welcomed. Once they understand we regard them as the present Church, a new relationship can develop in several ways.

(1) Compassion before legalism reflects the attitude of Christ. He loved and embraced people who did not always do it right. We need to do the same, especially with young people who do not always understand our/their church laws and local parish customs. They need to know they are wanted, appreciated, and accepted as members of the

Church, the body of Christ, first and foremost. Once you know you belong, then you are much more willing to explore how to belong.

(2) The Jesus Method of Organizing is a positive response to the critique that young adults are not around the parish and never volunteer for anything. Jesus employed a time tested method; direct personal invitation. Jesus did not put a sign on a cedar of Lebanon, "All Those Who Want To Be Apostles Sign Up Here." The real question is how to move someone from being an affiliative Catholic to a more practicing one. Or how do you get a word of welcome out to a new group of people who normally don't believe that anything is really for them in the local church. When they walk into weekend Mass, it is clear from a visual survey that the ushers, Communion ministers, lectors, and choir are not their age. If it worked for Jesus, why would it not work for those in pastoral, liturgical, or catechetical ministry today?

(3) The third pastoral strategy for the local church in developing a relationship with young adult people is the third moment of a sacrament. As we said above, perhaps the first moment of adult faith for many young adults comes at their time of marriage or the baptism of their progeny. For many this is also the first personal contact with the Catholic Church in many years. Sometimes it is not always a pleasant first contact. That first contact and the programmatic preparation for the sacramental ceremony is the first moment of the sacrament. The second moment is the actual sacramental event.

After the marriage or baptism ceremony is concluded, normally nothing happens. But there is a third moment to those ceremonies. It is the follow-up and ongoing relationship with the newly married couple or young adult family. That third moment is the local church, its ministers and people, reaching out with a sense of missionary zeal to its own young adult people by supporting their marriages, inquiring about their family and exhibiting on a regular basis, in person or by phone, a genuine interest and care for them as God's people.

The local church has an abundance of power. In any given situation it has the power to reach out, invite, welcome, respect and graciously respond to all its people. Very often a compassionate church minister, interfacing with this generation at a significant moment in their life or the life of their family (birth, love, sickness, death, and discernment), creates a spiritual openness to something More, to the presence of the Divine in a given moment of life. The compassionate outreach and response of the local church will not eliminate the struggles with doctrine, rule or custom, but can open up other aspects of the Catholic tradition that are more immediate, present and life-giving.

It would be easy, and totally wrong, to categorize the young adult generation as negative, aloof and hostile toward the Church. Part of their struggle is to understand the "why" of things. Our pastoral strategies

should be explained, not dictated. Our rules need to be understood, not simply enforced. Our beliefs need to be appropriated, not memorized. As they attempt to search for elements of lasting value for their lives, we claim to possess those values and traditions. We call it the Deposit of Faith. And the strategy to reveal the richness of the Catholic tradition might need to occur in a different way for young adults than it did for many of us.

(4) The fourth way that the Church's relationship with them can be developed is by using our Catholic tradition as a spiritual path to follow throughout life. At this age in their lives, they want to know how things "work" in their lives, not just what do they mean. They are not seeking a class to attend but a spiritual praxis to employ. Helping young adults seek a spiritual path might mean helping them ask the right questions: How do I get free (from my past)? How do I stay free (to be faithful)? Once those questions are asked, we can offer any searcher and seeker a number of spiritual paths from the Catholic Tradition that lead to freedom, perhaps most especially the sacrament of reconciliation.

SUMMARY

Young adults are looking for connection. They are searching for communion. At our Catholic Mass, we literally hold out that Communion. "The body of Christ," we say to those searchers and seekers. "Amen," is what we hope to hear in response. It can be the food for that spiritual hunger. Even more than a moment of personal piety or private religious expression, it is a sacred moment that says to them that this community of faith will make room for you to be in communion with Christ at Eucharist. When we are together and in communion with one another, we fill another place at the table of the Lord with their presence. We might not be able to make life easier for young adult people. Struggles, broken dreams, disappointments are a part of the human landscape for us all. But we can share such experiences and together let the richness of our Catholic faith give them meaning. And by doing so, perhaps those of us who minister in the Church today, can reveal by our actions and our communion with young adults, the sacramentality that drives our tradition. Every moment of life, the good times and bad, the sickness and health, the times alone, the times with others are shared with a God who loves us.

Developing a ministry that is responsive to the needs and life experience of young adults and yet faithful to the Catholic tradition is an urgent agenda for our time. There are ways out of the conundrum that keeps spiritually hungry Catholic young adults away from the Church. We have much to offer. They have much to learn. They have much to give. We have much to receive.

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