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The Spirituality of Young Adults: Handle with Care

Young people in their twenties and thirties are spiritual people. Like the generations who have gone before and those yet to come, the inner yearning for God continues to captivate and perturb the human spirit. The words of St. Augustine still pertain: "Our hearts are restless, O God, until they rest in Thee."

Yet, our young singles and couples are conspicuously absent from the churches. They have separated themselves from organized religion and are "altering the religious landscape of America in the 1990's" (Roof, 1993:1). Who are these younger generations, how is it that they are not in relationship with the institutional Church, and do we, today's church ministers, have what it takes to handle the potential challenges?

WHO ARE THE YOUNG ADULTS?

The focus here is on the generation following the "Baby Boomers," sometimes called the "Baby Busters" or "Generation X." This generation of women and men are now in their late teens, twenties, and early thirties. We cannot underestimate the impact of a changing world on these people. Almost all young adults have been inundated with the sounds and images of television for their entire lives. They have only known the world as a global village and have been able to watch events as they happen anywhere on this planet. Their computer experience on the Internet and World Wide Web has opened heretofore unknown possibilities for relationships, community, and knowledge. This is the most educated generation this country has ever known. A large percentage have completed college degrees and graduate studies, and now may carry responsibility for college loans.

Contemporary industry pays great attention to and is being guided by an ever younger labor force. According to Morningstar Inc., the Chicago fund-tracking service, more than one-third of all mutual funds are run by people in their twenties and thirties, who were actually in grade school at the time of the last bear market, back in the early '70s.

Young adults are mobile, fluid and busy. Careers demand flexibility and complete attention, even as loyalty to specific companies has been eroded by the down-sizing and consolidation of the '80s. For many

young adults, their financial prospects and hopes of achieving the American dream have decreased compared with those of their parents.

Our young people are exploring different lifestyles, having grown up when divorce, separation, and re-marriage were changing the definition of family. Many young adults live with their "significant other," skeptical about the notion of a long-term commitment. Keeping one's options open, life is to be lived in the short-term. In sum, as the pastoral plan for young adults *Sons and Daughters of the Light* states: "They come from diverse cultural, ethnic, educational, vocational, social, political and spiritual realities" (NCCB, 1997:v).

WHERE IS THE CHURCH?

. . . [W]e human beings seem unable to survive, and certainly cannot thrive, unless we can make meaning. We need to be able to make some sort of sense out of things; we seek pattern, order, coherence, and relation in the disparate elements of our experience. We must discover fitting connections between things (Parks, 1986: xv).

While society would want us to believe that our culture is totally secular, the majority of Americans have a faith, a belief system, which is central to their lives and which helps them come to some understanding of what life is all about. So, too, young adults yearn to make sense out of their lives. When they look to their church young adults want some assistance with this inner journey. They want answers to life's questions. They also expect to feel welcome and included by their local church. This inclusion entails the community accepting what young adults have to offer, letting their ideas and experiences be absorbed into the life of the parish.

These young people received their religious education long after the days of Vatican Council II and its call to renewal and adaptation. This historic church event is of minor importance to young adults, who have little understanding of its impact. Because their religious education did occur after the council, however, today's young people do not have the background or the knowledge about their faith that was handed on to earlier generations. They did not memorize the Baltimore Catechism under the watchful eyes of parents, priests and religious. Nor did they experience the Church's strict codes of behavior or the accompanying fear-filled images of God. As the Church struggled with its new identity as the people of God, religious educators were left floundering, unsure how to pass on the tradition.

As a consequence our young people may desire to be Catholic but many are not sure what that means. They are in search of spirituality and not religion. That distinction often causes them to turn away from

an institution which appears forbidding and to look elsewhere to deepen their relationship with God. At times it can seem like the Church will be of little help in the spiritual journey. The institution's rules and regulations, its imposing aura, its authority and strength can cause the searching and confused to believe they are not good enough to enter its doors. Young adults may sense that they do not belong, that the Church would not accept them due to the messiness of their lives. The Christian message that despite our creaturely limitations, indeed even with our sinfulness, we are still the beloved of God; this message has not always been effectively communicated to the newest generation of adults.

WHAT THE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY CAN DO

The gift that the community of faith can offer to our young adults is our rich spiritual heritage. This is what the Church is all about. Spirituality is the driving force behind everything that we do. The values and priorities of the People of God arise from their on-going relationship with The One Who Loves Us All.

Our Catholic spirituality has enabled us to develop a powerful outreach to the world's poor, underprivileged, abandoned, widowed, and homeless. The desire to be of service was taught to us by the One who came "that you may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Sacred Scripture gives us a way of life which leads us towards the Creator, which calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and which challenges us to live by values and priorities that are contrary to the popular culture, but which will bring us life's fullness. We, as a Church, have the message which can respond to the searching young adult. We have some of the answers they need and a way to live with the questions that are not easily answered. The spirituality which young adults are looking for is available within the Catholic tradition.

Just as businesses have learned how to respond to the needs of the times, religious leaders and ministers are being challenged to respond to the needs of young adults. So much of commercial advertising reaches beyond an individual's defenses and touches a deeper place, our desire to be loved and included. Local banks invite us to join their family, a car is described as our best friend that will never let us down. People in fast-food commercials often cause the viewer to smile, catch a breath, or even bring a tear to the eye. If business is reaching the spiritual place inside of us then certainly religion should be capable of doing so.

In the October/November 1997 issue of the business magazine *Fast Company*, the resident futurist at a global think tank suggests that the watchwords for the future will be "Downward nobility." He predicts that one will get attention by walking into a room and saying that one is happy or has been happily married for twenty-five years. He continues:

Satisfaction and domestic contentment are the status symbols of the future. The market is supersaturated with physical stuff, so instead of depending on conspicuous consumption, status will hinge on what's scarce—spiritual experiences. That's downward nobility, and it will become a fundamental organizing premise of the desires of humanity (Wacker, 1997:40).

This vision of the future, proposed by a forty-three-year-old Baby Boomer, is contrary to the image so often portrayed in current media. The lead figure in this future society is the storyteller. A new sensitivity develops in which the role of spirituality is acknowledged and applauded. While such a world may remain a dream, the sociologist Andrew Greeley maintains that it is the very stories of Catholicism which continue to appeal to the Catholic imagination. "Catholics remain Catholic because of the Catholic religious sensibility, a congeries of metaphors that explain what human life means, with deep and powerful appeal to the total person" (Greeley, 1994:38). We have stories, the means to pass on the tradition to the younger generations, to tell them the Catholic stories, and to affirm their desire to live their faith with depth and conviction.

THE CHALLENGE BEFORE US

During a Young Adult Conference held in 1994 within the diocese of Rockville Centre, the following question was asked: How can parishes make young adults feel welcome? Following are a few responses:

- Provide ways for recent college graduates interested in spirituality to meet each other.
- Homilies need to be directed to our age-group.
- They can validate us as vital and important members of the Church.
- What about those people who cannot be who they are because of the Church's condemnation of their sexuality?
- Have less expectations of what we will do, and invite us.
- Get away from the model of "married, with children in the parish school."
- Provide programs directed to young adults, such as dances, bible study, etc.

From such comments it is evident that these young adults are looking for something. By such statements, they are telling parishes what they are not finding. And when they do not find what they need, our young adults lose the connection with parish life. They make other choices. They may spend Sunday morning in a museum, riding a bicycle in the park, or just doing what they do not have time for during

the rest of the week. The practice of going to church is no longer seen as a priority, and the whole impact of Sunday as a day of worship and a day of rest fades away. Alternatively, the religious option may be to find a place for worship where they are made to feel at home. This might be a college campus, another parish they have heard about, or perhaps a church of another denomination which creates a welcoming atmosphere and speaks to their issues.

Business as usual is not working for the Church any more. Just because the lives of previous generations rotated around the parish complex does not mean that will inevitably be the case in the future. Years ago, the parish was frequently a family gathering place for the entire community and neighborhood. Religious and priests were household figures. Sunday was the day everyone went to church together. Many children went to Catholic school, played under the auspices of a parish-affiliated sport league or social activity, and grew up naming their parish as the place where they lived.

Today, the parish no longer plays such a central role. With their busy lives and being so much on the move, many young adults do not know to which parish they belong and will often claim their parents' parish as their own, even if they live far away. As transients they may not even know who their neighbors are, having little or no relationship with the community where they reside.

If you build it they will come is not the secret to a thriving parish either. This may be the crucial strategy when opening another suburban mall or establishing a new sports stadium. But even these, if they are to stay in business, must meet the needs of the people. It will no longer be enough for parish leaders to discuss strategies and plan programs with the good of the young people in mind. Our young adults need to be on board from the start so that their needs are clearly known.

Who has the time to start another program? is too often heard from busy church ministers. While church leaders are busy about many things, the simple fact is that unless we take time for the next generation we will become "un-busy" quickly. Our congregations will continue to decline as will the numbers of people responding to God's call to serve in church ministry. There is plenty we can do to serve young adults.

STEPS TO BE TAKEN

In order for church ministers to respond to young adults they might begin by getting in touch with their own spirituality. As ministers, we need to name for ourselves the spirituality which is the driving force behind our lives. Then, when young people question the Church and its behavior, its teachings, we can *speak to them from our own lived experience about the God whom they seek*, about the relationship for which they yearn. As part of a contemplative approach to life, we are invited

to recognize the blessings and gifts all around us and within us. St. Paul says we hold a treasure in earthen vessels. But we tend to be more aware of the earthen vessel than the treasure. Our relationship with God reminds us of our goodness, our blessedness. Can we, as people of the Gospel, articulate this to ourselves and to others?

Can we talk about our prayer? What are we like when we come to God? What happens as a result of our interaction with God? What is our image of God at this moment in life? How has the image changed over time? Each of us discovers the ways that assist us in focusing on our inner life, and we have developed, over time, our own personal spirituality. Because of the ups and downs along the way, we have come to terms with our faith. We have owned that faith, that framework which supports our values and priorities.

Young adults yearn to be with people who can and will talk about these crucial, interior struggles. They want to know how we experience God, what we mean when we use the term God's will, how we live with losses and untimely deaths. We can be mentors for them on their journey to God.

Outreach to this generation of young adults needs to *begin with personal invitation*. The Church is not on their computer screens, so the Church must reach out, personally, and invite young people to participate. Bulletin announcements and requests for volunteers after Mass will not elicit an enthusiastic response. Ministers need to develop specific strategies of outreach and inclusion which will incorporate young adults into the life of the local church. A personal invitation to a conversation about the needs of young adults, for example, will be engaging and has the potential to lead to further involvement.

We who are church leaders cannot hand young adults a packaged program and expect them to carry it out. Young adults need to be invited to develop the program themselves. We can be available for support and suggestions, for sharing ideas about previous experience and recommending guidelines which we have found invaluable. However, for young adults to feel ownership of a program or to feel involved and included in the life of their church, their own ideas and suggestions must be incorporated. Such *collaboration with young adults* is a necessary strategy.

As the young adults take ownership of their involvement in parish life, they will minister to each other. This *peer ministry empowers them* to develop their own direction, respond to needs as they arise, listen to, support, and encourage each other. Thus, leadership and relational skills are developed in the context of what it means to be Catholic.

Underlying the development of young adult involvement is the creation of *an atmosphere of welcoming and hospitality*. Like any of us, they need to be greeted and helped to feel at home when they come to

church. Young people would gather at Eucharist if we invited them to participate. They need to see their peers involved as ministers at the celebration. Church leaders ought to invite young adults to be lectors, ministers of the Eucharist, ushers and leaders of song. It must be clear that the parish desires to see young adults present, is willing to include them in a significant way, and recognizes the valuable contributions that they bring.

Customers are welcomed when they walk into a clothing store, are offered coffee when they wait at the garage until the car is ready. Surely fellow Catholics can welcome each other when we gather for weekend worship. Young adults are disappointed that they can come to church and leave again without speaking to anyone, as if they had been at the movies. They, and we, are coming to church to be nourished on the spiritual journey. They need to know that others travel with them and are similarly challenged and plagued by the bumps along the road. A gracious and welcoming community can make the journey much more palatable.

A FEW CAUTIONS

Several points must be remembered as church leaders take up the challenge of ministering to young adults:

- *Put aside your agenda.* While ministers may have great dreams about the participation of young adults in parish life, the needs of the younger generations must be the driving force behind any outreach.
- *Be their resource.* Young adults have limited knowledge about things Catholic. Yet, their urge to be connected with that spirituality is what will draw them. Leaders should be available to participate in conversations and to provide sound theology. Making available the names of speakers, spiritual directors and counselors will emphasize the importance of spiritual companions.
- *Don't do much. Teach a few and let them teach the rest.* Gather support teams together. Find the people you want in leadership roles and ask them to be a part of the team. Talk with a few and show them how they might build an agenda, set a direction, go out of their way to welcome the newcomers. Let them broaden the circle and invite whomever they wish to come to future gatherings. They will be the best ambassadors and, by word of mouth, will pass on to others like themselves the good news about what is happening.
- *Watch your language. Handle symbols with care.* Young adults do not know Church language. They may be versed in computer language, but they are not likely to know what RCIA means, for example. They will not be familiar with the languages of liturgy or

of sacred Scripture. The symbols use by our gathered community are filled with tradition and meaning. Our reflective use of religious language and symbol must be within the comprehension of our young people while remaining faithful to our own Catholic tradition.

PILGRIMS TOGETHER

“Pilgrimages are commonly group movements in which pilgrims of different rank and status must learn to relate supportively at a level of deep faith and love with one another” (Arbuckle, 1996:109). Today’s pilgrims are no different. Perhaps those with more experience can be persuaded that their valuable life stories need to be told to the younger travelers. At the same time, perhaps the young adults can be persuaded to join in the conversation, to listen and question, to reflect and take to heart.

Today’s young singles and couples are not tomorrow’s Church but today’s Church. They are leaders in industry, the teachers of our children, policewomen and fire-fighters. Some are unemployed, raising children on their own, immigrants in a new land, living on military bases miles from home. While they long for meaning in life, and search for inner peace, they do not automatically turn to religious institutions for answers to life’s questions. The Church offers a way of living which can respond to the inner spiritual journey, the young person’s search for God. As God’s gathered people we have the gifts to meet young people’s greatest need. Do we, as church ministers, have the abilities to respond effectively? Now is the time to do so. Let us not hesitate.

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