



Catholic Generations

Finding Common Ground

I was enjoying a lovely dinner at the home of my high school classmate Phil, his wife, Annmarie, and their college-age sons, Thomas and John. Things became really interesting when the conversation turned to the topic of growing up Catholic: think Latin Mass, all-year meatless Fridays, Pagan Babies, and spiritual bouquets. The parents and I alternated between wistful nostalgia and howls of laughter. Their sons gave us blank stares.

“Pagan Babies was a Catholic school fundraiser for the missions,” I tried to explain. Thomas and John listened politely, but their faces betrayed that “What planet are you from?” look that children (even grown ones) sometimes give their parents. This was clearly a Catholic generation gap!

Teenagers of the 1960s seemed to grow up with an innate sense of the generation gap. “Don’t trust anyone over 30” was a popular and empowering catch phrase. Parents at the time were bewildered by their children’s rebelliousness: long hair on boys; jeans on girls; loud, cryptic rock music; a generally loosened sexual morality; and an anti-establishment streak that openly criticized the president and the war in Vietnam. The generation gap took 1960s parents by surprise. Today an improved understanding of generational dynamics is helping parents and educators relate better with young people.

Generational awareness will be helpful for the Catholic Church as it moves forward in this new millennium. Time-honored approaches to religious education, youth ministry, and liturgy may no longer be the most effective ways to engage young people in the message of Christ.

THE FOUR GENERATIONS

Sociologists like James Davidson, William Strauss, and Neil Howe have discerned at least four distinct generations or age groups for society today. Each has been shaped by their collective experiences in areas like family life, education, pop culture, politics, and re-

ligion. Here are the generally recognized demarcations, interfaced with the Catholic experience:

The World War II Generation

Born from the mid-1920s through 1945.

Designated as “the Greatest Generation” by Tom Brokaw because of their intimate and selfless participation in the war, these pre-Vatican II Catholics had a eucharistic fast that began at midnight before their anticipated Mass and lasted all the way up to the reception of Communion. Favorite hymns of this group often include “Panis Angelicus,” “Holy God, We Praise Thy Name,” and “Tantum Ergo Sacramentum.”

The Baby Boomer Generation

Born from 1946 through 1960.

These are Vatican II Catholics who had the 1960s as an overarching cultural framework. Their eucharistic fast lasted only three hours before Communion. Popular hymns of their youth include “Here We Are,” “They’ll Know We Are Christians,” and “It’s a Brand New Day.”

Generation X

Born from 1961 through 1981.

These post-Vatican II Catholics had to live up to (or live down) their Boomer parents’ idealism. Unfairly nicknamed “the Slacker Generation” because of their alleged lack of direction, the Xers’ eucharistic fast lasted only one hour before Communion. Their favorite hymns probably include “Here I Am, Lord,” “Be Not Afraid,” and “On Eagle’s Wings.”

Millennial Generation

Born 1982 through the present.

Sometimes called “Generation Y,” these post-Vatican II Catholics have lived most of their lives under

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the papacy of Pope John Paul II. Asked about a eucharistic fast, their answer might be, “What’s a fast?” Their favorite hymns might include “Your Grace Is Enough,” “Lord, I Lift Your Name on High,” and “Adoration: Tantum Ergo Sacramentum.”

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

A lot of research has been done that focuses on the areas of agreement and disagreement between the Catholic generations. In particular, it includes the work of James Davidson and his collaborators in their book *The Search for Common Ground*. The Davidson team conducted a nationwide poll of Catholics in 1995. Not surprisingly, they noticed that the lines are drawn around the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church’s mid-twentieth century response to the modern world.

Each generation has responded differently to the Council. Many in the World War II generation reacted, for the most part, in shock, particularly to the changes in liturgy, Catholic customs, and Church structure. The Boomers were in the midst of the changes and seemed to revel in them. The post-Boomers were catechized in a Church that had settled from the Council’s reforms, with serious ramifications for Generation X and the Millennials.

The Trends

Here are some trends noted by William D’Antonio et al. in their book *Laiety: American and Catholic*. Please note these are general observations, not absolute statements about the groups, much less about each individual in them.

- Post-Vatican II Catholics tend to place a higher priority on being good Christians than they do on being good Catholics. This seems to be a direct result of the ecumenical emphasis in young Catholics’ religious education
- Older generations tend to give great weight to the institutional nature of the Church. Post-Vatican II Catholics tend to think differently and tend to have a deinstitutionalized and democratic view of the Church. They tend to be more inclined to think of the Church as “the People of God”
- Post-Vatican II Catholics often make a rather sharp distinction between God’s law and Church law and, when the two are in tension with each other, tend to put a higher authority on God’s law. Pre-Vatican II Catholics usually assume that God’s law and Church law are one and the same

- Post-Vatican II Catholics are more likely than older Catholics to disagree with specific Church teachings. Young Catholics are most inclined to question beliefs on matters like papal infallibility, birth control, and abortion and least likely to accept behavioral standards like regular Mass attendance
- Post-Vatican II Catholics tend to view God as an all-loving and forgiving friend who mostly just wants us to be nice to others
- Post-Vatican II Catholics are usually relatively uninformed about Church teachings
- Post-Vatican II Catholics tend to lack a vocabulary to help them form a Catholic identity and interpret their Catholic experience
- Older generations of Catholics have usually learned that some behaviors are naturally right and others are naturally wrong, according to God’s plan. Post-Vatican II Catholics have mostly learned that the rightness or wrongness of one’s actions depends more on the circumstances and effects such actions have on others (84-88)

An interesting corollary lies in the generational differences between older and younger priests. Professor Dean Hoge, of The Catholic University of America, explains in his 1998 *America* article, “Get Ready for the Post-Boomer Catholics”: “Whereas post-Boomer laypeople are not different from Boomer laypeople, post-Boomer priests *are* different from Boomer priests. The young priests are more conservative on several matters [which is to say, they tend to lean on the cautious side when it comes to celibacy, empowering lay ministry, allowing parishes to choose their own pastors, and allowing priests in a diocese to choose their own bishop]. The best evidence comes from a survey of priests in 1993 commissioned by the National Federation of Priests’ Councils.... We get additional information on age differences among priests from a 1993 survey of American priests done by the Los Angeles Times” (10).

This research was conducted before the Millennials reached high school graduation. Now that this group is in college and in the workplace, what is the latest research saying about them? The newly published Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in America is quite revealing. In his March 2008 Los Angeles Times article, John Allen Paulos writes that “almost one in six (16.1%) of the respondents said they are not affiliated with any particular religious faith, and this figure rises to one in four for 18- to 29-year-olds.”

Sociologist Jean M. Twenge, a Millennial herself, reinforces her generation’s tendency to stay away from organized religion in her best-selling book, *Generation*

Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before. She interviewed hundreds of young people who were more than happy to share their ideas: “Many don’t adhere to a specific belief system because, as Melissa says, ‘I believe that whatever you feel, it’s personal.... Everybody has their own idea of God and what God is.... You have your own personal beliefs of how you feel about it and what’s acceptable for you and what’s right for you personally.’ In an April 2005 poll, 3 out of 4 American Catholics said they were more likely to ‘follow my own conscience’ on difficult moral questions rather than follow ‘the teachings of Pope Benedict’” (34).

The Source of Generational Differences

What lies at the root of these generational differences? Dean Hoge presents this theory in “Catholic Generational Differences”: “I have read dozens of articles about Catholic generational differences and about how young Catholics today are alienated. But surely the young are not alienated on every topic, since their religious questions and spiritual needs are not so different from those of Catholics in the last 500 or 1,000 years. The best explanation, based on empirical data, seems to be that the biggest generational differences today stem from the revolutions set in motion in the 1960s. The main ones were the cultural revolution (stressing doing your own thing, tolerance of diversity, and participatory democracy), the sexual revolution, and the women’s revolution. These revolutions lie directly behind the largest generational differences that face us today” (18).

THE FUTURE

Catholic generational differences raise concern for the future of the Church. If the empirical data is to be believed, younger Catholics are growing away from traditional Catholic identity and practice, even as the priesthood is moving in a conservative direction. Tensions between laity and clergy will most likely be played out, not in face-to-face confrontation over specific issues, but with the quiet disengagement that is already happening with the Xers and Millennials. Bishops, priests, catechists, and parish leaders will need to strategize on effective ways to reach young people and help them embrace Catholic tradition as their own.

There’s Common Ground

The future is far from bleak. There is a lot of common ground between the Catholic generations. Hoge notes that there are no discernible differences between age groups, that is, the age groups tend to agree on numerous issues:

- The bread and wine in the Mass are truly transformed into the body and blood of Christ
- There is a shared view of how to interpret the Bible
- There is a shared view about life after death
- There’s a desire for more democracy in parishes, dioceses, and at the Vatican
- Laity should be allowed to take part in decisions about parish finances. They should also be allowed to write about church teachings, economic justice, and world peace
- There should be more roles for women, especially for women who want to be lectors, eucharistic ministers, altar servers, and deacons
- Most parishes succeed in being welcoming, spiritually helpful, and good at meeting parishioners’ personal needs
- There is a shared view on capital punishment (“Catholic Generational Differences” 17)

These are important areas of generational agreement that the Church can build on. This points out that it is in the core areas of Catholic faith where agreement lies: the Eucharist, Scripture, social justice, and Catholic community. Disagreement seems to center on the periphery issues: sexuality and reproductive concerns, situational ethics, priestly celibacy, and women in the priesthood. The younger generation’s apparent lack of Catholic identity is also an important concern.

United in the Eucharist

I will leave the discussion of the periphery issues to the experts in the fields of doctrine and catechesis. For the scope of *Today’s Liturgy*, let us focus on the main area of Catholic generational agreement as discovered in various surveys: the Eucharist. Since all generations agree strongly that in the Mass the bread and wine truly become the body and blood of Christ, it follows that the liturgy is the key that will help draw the generations together in a common bond of faith.

When I look back on my own life, I am struck by how I have lived my Catholic faith through the four generations. My mother was a child in the Philippines during World War II, and she has shared many stories of the Japanese invasion of her seaside village. Her arm is still scarred by shrapnel wounds, but she also has

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wonderful memories of hometown Catholic celebrations when parishes honored their patron saints with elaborate liturgical pageants in which my mother often played a role.

My own seminal experience of Catholicism comes from being an altar boy in grade school while the Mass was still in Latin. I was the first public-school altar boy in my Los Angeles parish, a rarity in those days when only Catholic school kids filled the server ranks. Liturgical Latin came easily for me, and I was thrilled to ride my bike in what felt like bitter winter cold so I could serve at the 6:30 a.m. daily Mass.

I also sang in the children's choir, and I trace my love for Gregorian chant to that experience. Nevertheless, I was excited about the new English Mass, and I eventually played guitar in my high school's folk Mass ensemble. I was a Boomer Catholic who reveled in the fresh vitality of my church, even though I had been grounded in its pre-Council traditions and customs.

My involvement in youth ministry in the eighties, the nineties, and in this current decade has kept me in touch with the Xers and Millennials. I remember the Search retreats, Serendipity, work camp service trips, Bible sharing groups, DJ dances, overnight lock-ins, and all the approaches our youth ministry team tried so our teens would be engaged in their Catholic community. In one parish, we had a skateboard club. In another parish we staged rock concerts featuring local teen garage bands.

But the common empowering thread in youth ministry and throughout my life has always been the eucharistic liturgy. In every parish where I have served, we had a youth choir where I tried to give young musicians an appreciation and love for the Mass. We also took care to recruit and train teens in the other liturgical ministries of lector, usher, and extraordinary minister of Communion. The Eucharist was clearly the key to successful youth ministry, whether they came into contact with it at a weekly or monthly youth Mass or simply by serving in a regular Sunday liturgy.

The reasons for this are obvious. As the central act of Catholic worship, the eucharistic liturgy gathers together people of all generations and cultures. Young people are proud to share their gifts in liturgical ministry. Their parents and families are proud to see them serve, and the older Catholic faithful are pleased to see that the faith is being handed on to a new generation. The USCCB's document *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* explains that "Ministry with adolescents recognizes the importance of the

intergenerational faith community in sharing faith and promoting healthy growth in adolescents. Meaningful involvement in parish life and the development of intergenerational relationships provide young people with rich resources to learn the story of the Catholic faith experientially and to develop a sense of belonging to the Church" ("Intergenerational," Part Three).

As I wrote in "Youth Mass as Intergenerational Gift Exchange," which appeared in the Holy Week 2007 issue of this magazine, the liturgy can be an ideal medium for younger and older Catholics to work together in something they share in common. In addition to having their regular liturgical ministries, parishes would do well to also consider inviting youth involvement in liturgy planning. Because post-Vatican II Catholics place a high value in lay participation in the decision-making areas of the Church, liturgy planning can be a great way for young people to experience this for the first time.

The Resurgence of Eucharistic Adoration

Since belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the most common thread of belief shared by all generations, it is interesting to observe a current movement in the Church where young people seem to be taking the lead: the renewal of eucharistic adoration, the traditional Catholic devotion where the consecrated host is displayed in a monstrance and placed on the altar for veneration by the faithful. Many Boomer Catholics are concerned about adoration's resurgence because of a false notion that Vatican II abolished it, but the Church never issued a decree demanding that. In fact, Pope Paul VI interrupted his involvement with the Council by writing *Mysterium Fidei*, an encyclical that reaffirmed the mystery of the Eucharist in an age when doubts were beginning to rise about its importance. Pope Paul's encyclical is quoted in two articles from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* about eucharistic adoration (1378 and 1418 respectively):

- "Worship of the Eucharist: In the liturgy of the Mass we express our faith in the real presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine by, among other ways, genuflecting or bowing deeply as a sign of adoration of the Lord. 'The Catholic Church has always offered and still offers to the sacrament of the Eucharist the cult of adoration, not only during Mass, but also outside of it, reserving the consecrated hosts with the utmost care, exposing them to the solemn veneration of the faithful, and carrying them in procession'"

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Three popular youth ministry programs feature eucharistic adoration as an important component: Life Teen, the Steubenville youth conferences of the Franciscan community, and the One Bread, One Cup youth liturgical leadership conferences of the Benedictine community at St. Meinrad. “Tantum Ergo Sacramentum” is being sung once again by our young people, thanks to Matt Maher’s modern arrangement of it. Through eucharistic adoration, the attention-challenged, channel-surfing Wii generation is discovering the transforming power of deep prayer. This is an extraordinary blessing. Through adoration, Millennial Catholics are finding common ground with the pre-Vatican II generation.

CONCLUSION

The Catholic generations need to work together to find the common ground we all share in our faith tradition, even as the generations challenge each other with their own unique gifts and sensibilities. In future articles of this series, we will hear from a writer of the Millennial generation and from a composer who has had many years of experience in the catechetical and liturgical formation of Catholic youth. Stay tuned!

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