ARTICLE

THE MISSION OF CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOLS AND TODAY'S MILLENNIALS: THREE SUGGESTIONS

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A new generation of American Catholics, called the millennial generation, has emerged. This article examines how millennials think about their world, their Church, and their schools; discusses how and why their thinking will change as they mature; and offers research-based suggestions on how best to present the Catholic tradition to them.

In recent years, a number of sociologists of religion have focused attention on generational differences among American Catholics. To this point in time, researchers have distinguished between three generations: pre-Vatican II Catholics (people 60 and older), the "baby boomers" or Vatican II Catholics (born between 1941 and 1960), and Generation X or post-Vatican II Catholics (born between 1961 and 1981).

But we are now experiencing the emergence of a new generation, often called the millennial generation, which includes Catholics born since 1982. These millennials are being formed in the social and religious context of the U.S. in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century. Among other things, this context includes social anxieties related to threats of global terrorism, the increased possibility of war, and the economic downturn of the last 2 to 3 years. It also includes high levels of skepticism about social institutions such as government, business, marriage, education, and religion. This skepticism is accompanied by an emphasis on the potency of the individual's personal experiences and the authority of one's own conscience (over and against societal rules and regulations). As we draft this article, these and other influences are shaping the way millennials think about the world they live in, the church in which they are being raised, and the schools they attend. Research has shown that the experiences millennials have during their formative years, approximately between ages 11 and 22, will have especially

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profound effects on the way they think and act for the rest of their lives. Certainly, millennials will adapt and change over the course of their adult lives; but these adaptations and changes will occur within rather well-defined frameworks set by the experiences they have during their teenage and young adult years.

The oldest of these millennials are now 21 years of age. They are college sophomores and juniors, or they have, following graduation from high school, 2 or 3 years of experience in the labor force. These older millennials are nearing the end of their most formative years and, therefore, are on the leading edge of their generation. Younger millennials are in the nation's high schools, junior highs, and grade schools. They are still in the generational incubator, very much in the formative process. Thus, it is still too early to know for sure what they will be like as adults.

However, many parents, church leaders, and Catholic educators have asked us what we know about the millennial generation. They seem especially interested in knowing whether millennials will be an extension of Generation X or will be markedly different. They raise this question, we believe, because they want to know how best to present the Catholic tradition to Catholic high school students. Our goal in this paper is to explore these issues and to offer suggestions based on research related to generations and our understanding of Catholic education.

RETROSPECTIVE ON SOME RELEVANT RESEARCH

We begin by recapping the body of research that extends back at least 35 years. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many religious who had founded and staffed Catholic high schools and grade schools began to leave the teaching profession and even their religious communities. In this context one of the first researchers to study Catholic schools, priest-scholar Fr. Andrew Greeley, underscored the importance and benefits of parochial schools, especially the distinctive religious outcomes of Catholic schooling.

James Coleman, sociologist at the University of Chicago, focused even more attention on the distinctive organization of Catholic schools and the academic achievement of their students. Coleman and others showed that students at Catholic schools were academically more successful, experienced more consistent discipline, studied a more structured curriculum, benefited from a greater sense of community with the faculty, and regarded themselves as more of a community than did their counterparts in public schools. Coleman offered the concept of "social capital," that is, the power of social relationships in Catholic schools (e.g., parental support and teacher commitment and availability outside of the classroom), to help explain the benefits of Catholic education (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982).

Meanwhile, Greeley continued his research and, on the basis of his findings, pleaded with the hierarchy and the members of the religious communities to remain committed to the education of the young. In *Minority Students in Catholic Secondary Schools*, Greeley (1981) showed that not only did minority students in Catholic schools perform better than their peers in public schools, but that the degree of achievement was greatest for those most disadvantaged.

Also in the 1980s, research conducted by Tony Bryk and Valerie Lee, Peter Benson, and Michael Guerra emphasized the positive impact of school policies that promote academic content and high expectations, the beliefs and practices of high school faculty, and the religious leadership of the principal. The widely discussed book by Bryk, Lee, and Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (1993), pointed to the transformative power of the culture of Catholic high schools as the main reason that their students achieved more consistently at a higher level than their public counterparts. That culture drew upon the core curriculum (not a large number of electives), the expectation that all students could and should attend college, and the emphasis on a moral basis of the school's sense of community. Their study showed that such achievement did not depend on the dismissal of problem students, nor upon families willing to pay the tuition.

Helpful summaries of these studies and related research are provided by Convey's *Catholic Schools Make A Difference: Twenty-Five Years of Research* (1992) and more recently by a book he edited with Youniss and McLellan, *The Catholic Character of Catholic Schools* (2000). Also valuable is the *Handbook of Research on Catholic Education* edited by Hunt, Joseph, and Nuzzi (2001). This research not only increases our appreciation of the strength of Catholic education; it also invites us to explore new questions about the ways in which Catholic high schools might strengthen the effectiveness of their religious mission. We believe our question about generational research and the religious mission of Catholic high schools constitutes one of those new questions.

CURRENT GENERATIONAL RESEARCH

Recent research on generations of Catholics can be found in four volumes: *Laity: American and Catholic* (D'Antonio et al, 1996), *The Search for Common Ground: What Unites and Divides American Catholics* (Davidson et al., 1997), *American Catholics: Gender, Generation and Commitment* (D'Antonio et al, 2001), and *Young Adult Catholics* (Hoge et al, 2001). Among other things, these studies show that, by far, the biggest differences between the generations are between the pre-Vatican II Catholics and the succeeding two generations. Clearly, the cultural revolution of the 1960s and the Second Vatican Council combined to produce significant social and religious

differences between Catholics who were born and raised before the 1960s and those who came along during and after that momentous period.

One reason why the gap is smaller between the Vatican II and post-Vatican II generations has to do with the choices that members of the Vatican II generation are making. When faced with the choice of embracing the religious ethos of the pre-Vatican II Church and the ethos of the post-Vatican II Church, the majority of baby boomers have chosen the latter. While a minority of boomers hold on to or want to return to the faith orientation of their parents' generation, most do not. The vast majority of boomers remain committed to core church teachings (e.g., Trinity, Incarnation, Resurrection, Real Presence, and Mary as the Mother of God); but on other matters, they clearly favor the "new Church" over the "old Church."

Members of the Vatican II generation have transmitted this preference to their children, who can best be seen as extensions of their parents, not as radical departures from them. Still, given the even more individualistic world that Gen Xers have grown up in, they are even more autonomous in their thinking than their boomer parents. They do not feel as obligated or committed to the institutional Church, as evidenced by the lower rates of Mass attendance and their frequent departures from official Church teachings on a number of ecclesiastical and moral issues.

How, then, do Gen X Catholics compare with the next generation of millennials? Research on the millennial generation is in its infancy. It will be a number of years until we have a clear sense of how different millennials will be from their Gen X parents and their baby boomer grandparents. One early study of millennials, conducted by Thomas P. Walters (2001) during the fall of 1999 and winter of 2000, included a survey of over 6,000 13- and 15-year-olds in Catholic high schools and parish religious education programs. Walters reported seven "facts" about millennials. According to Walters, millennials: (1) are not thinking about becoming priests or religious; (2) are quite optimistic; (3) consider themselves religious; (4) are in danger of being theologically illiterate; (5) are "teleliterate"; (6) trust their parents; and (7) get mixed messages from the Church. Reading further in Walters' analysis, we find that these students do not have a real connection to the Church or the parish. They "believe but don't belong." While they trust their parents, they are not encouraged by them to think of priesthood or religious life—something that doesn't occur to them either, even though they believe they are quite religious. Being "quite religious" seems to mean not that they understand and commit themselves to being Catholic Christians, but that they approach religion quite pragmatically, looking for what "works for them," and associating religion mainly with pleasing and affirming experiences.

Walters' study is only one study of the millennial generation and makes no claims of being a representative sample of millennial Catholics (e.g., it includes an over-representation of Catholic school students). And, while it

suggests that millennials might be different in some respects (i.e., more optimistic, more trusting of their parents), it also suggests that in many other respects millennials are likely to be natural extensions of, not radical departures from, their parents' generation.

We base this interpretation on three findings related to their parents' beliefs and practices. First, members of the post-Vatican II generation frequently identify themselves as *"spiritual but not religious."* Davidson and his colleagues (1997) have shown that the vast majority of Gen X Catholics believe God has answered their prayers and has helped them in times of need, but 40% are not registered in a parish and only 33% attend Mass on a weekly basis. Hoge and his colleagues (2001) report that 90% of Catholic young adults are "spiritual but not religious," while only 10% are "core Catholics," that is, can be said to be both spiritual and religious. These findings are echoed in Walters' findings that millennials "believe but don't belong" and are not thinking about becoming priests or religious.

Second, many Generation Xers *lack the social networks* and relationships ("social capital") that would make their faith a more explicit part of their lives. Although 72% say their mothers went to church weekly, only half say their fathers did. While 75% were close to their mothers while growing up, only half were close to their fathers. Seventy-one percent say their current social network includes a Catholic whom they admire, but only half say that person is active in the Church, and only one third describe that person as a traditional Catholic. Gen X Catholics also are less likely than their grandparents and parents were to marry a Catholic. Only 60% of Gen X Catholics who have married are married to a Catholic. There is nothing in Walters' data or any of our observations which indicates a reversal of these patterns. Thus, millennials too are not likely to have the "thick" Catholic networks that their grandparents and great-grandparents had.

This conclusion is important because social relationships affect people's religious beliefs and practices. People are most likely to be active in the Church and most likely to embrace its teachings if their parents were religious, if they were close to their parents, if their friendships include other people who are active and traditional Catholics, and if they married a Catholic. Young Catholics without these social networks are less connected with the Church and less inclined to embrace its teachings.

Third, young adults are *critical of the religious education* they have received in parishes and parochial schools. When Davidson and his colleagues (1997) interviewed and conducted focus groups with post-Vatican II Catholics, they asked them to describe their experiences in religious education. Their respondents consistently complained about the overemphasis on process and the lack of substance (often referring to the banners and collages they were asked to make, while admitting that they learned little or nothing about events such as Pentecost). Hoge and his colleagues (2001) document

the same dissatisfaction in even more graphic detail. In our conversations with college freshmen and sophomores, members of the millennial generation continue to express these perceptions of their experiences in religious education. Certainly there are many gifted religious educators, and many catechists are trying to put more emphasis on substance; but it does not appear that these adjustments have taken hold on any broad scale. Given Walters' finding that millennials are on the verge of religious illiteracy, it also would appear that the newest generation is an extension of its parents' generation in this respect.

CORROBORATION

Two additional bodies of knowledge must be considered. First, many of the same characteristics have been reported by other researchers. Recent studies on the religious attitudes of young adults in England underscore the same points. In Hornsby-Smith's 1999 book *Catholics in England 1950 to 2000*, several scholars describe trends similar to ones found among U.S. Catholics. John Fulton (1999), for example, documents the same patterns of increased autonomy and changing Catholic identities of young adult Catholics in England. Elsewhere, Rev. Leslie Francis, professor of practical theology at the University of Wales, found that only 15% of young women ages 13-15 and 13% of young men report weekly church attendance. Francis claims that institutional religion remains a powerful influence in some teenagers' lives; although only 41% of youth believe in God, nearly 78% want to get married in the Church, and over half want their children baptized. But however "powerful" an influence religion may have on British young adults, Francis also reports that 65% do not believe they are worth much as a person, 52% often feel depressed, and 27% have seriously considered suicide. Given those statistics, it is difficult to understand why Francis continues to believe that religion remains a powerful influence, unless the emphasis is placed upon "some" young persons as deeply influenced by religion, and those "some" being quite small in number (Francis & Kay, 1995, 1996; Survey, 2001).

A second body of literature suggests that young adults' individualistic tendencies are deeply rooted in the American character. Here we think of Alexis DeTocqueville's penetrating insights into the voluntaristic nature of the American character and religious ethos. Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1841 essay, "Self Reliance," also celebrates individualism and describes religion as best located in the private and personal lives of individuals who can think for themselves. Later in the 19th century, the brilliant religious thinker and convert to Catholicism, John Henry Newman, singled out "liberalism" as the fundamental problem facing Christians. In his own words, liberalism is an antidogmatic principle that teaches

> that truth and falsehood in religion are but matters of opinion; that one doctrine is as good as another; that the Governor of the world does not intend that we should gain the truth; that there is no truth; that we are not more acceptable to God by believing this than by believing that; that no one is answerable for his opinions; that they are a matter of necessity or accident; that it is enough if we sincerely hold that we profess; that our merit lies in seeking, not in possessing. (Newman, 1989, pp. 357-358)

In the wake of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, the "liberal" approach to religious belief and practice is more widespread now in Western society than when Newman first described it so carefully. This conclusion is compatible with observations made by sociologists such as Robert Bellah, Robert Wuthnow, and Wade Clark Roof—all of whom have stressed the individualistic and voluntaristic nature of religious life in America today.

Finally, we find support for our analysis in the writings of philosopher Charles Taylor (2002), whom Richard Rorty once described as one of the 10 most important philosophers writing in the world today. According to Bellah (2002), two important facts must be kept in mind about Taylor. First, among widely read philosophers today, he is only one of two (the other is Alisdair MacIntyre) who is a practicing Catholic. And second, he is "unusually knowledgeable about the social sciences…, and is primarily concerned with the intellectual, ethical and religious meaning of modernity" (Bellah, 2002, p. 20).

Taylor delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures in 1999. Though the lectures are not yet published, one of the themes of those lectures is nicely developed in a small volume, *Varieties of Religion Today* (2002). Taylor shows why the Harvard religious psychologist and pragmatist philosopher William James (1982), whose own classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was presented as the 1899 Gifford Lectures, remains so contemporary.

For James (1982), authentic religion resembles closely the "I'm spiritual but not religious" approach. He has little use for churches and organized religion; instead, he focuses on the religious experience of individuals, "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude." Those who seek God through churches experience God, James states, "second hand," as a "dull habit." Thus, the real locus of religion is the individual, not the community, and first-hand experiences instead of reciting traditional formulas and performing the rituals of traditional religion. In James' own words:

> The word "religion" as ordinarily used, is equivocal. A survey of history shows us that, as a rule, religious geniuses attract disciples and produce groups of sympathizers. When these groups get strong enough to "organize" themselves, they become ecclesiastical institutions with corporate ambitions of their own. The spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt

> to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing; so that when we hear the word "religion" nowadays, we think inevitably of some "church" or other; and to some persons the word "church" suggests so much hypocrisy and tyranny and meanness and tenacity of superstition that in a wholesale undiscerning way they glory in saying that they are "down" on religion altogether. (James, 1982, pp. 334-335)

Needless to say, James has trouble appreciating Catholicism. As Taylor explains, "what James can't seem to accommodate is the phenomenon of collective religious life, which is not just the result of (individual) religious connections, but which in some way constitutes or *is* that connection" (2002, p. 24). At the heart of that connection, Taylor continues, is the fact that the Church is a sacramental communion. When people today say that they are "spiritual but not religious," and when Catholics say that they don't "get anything out of Mass," they have connected with neither the community nor the sacrament.

This deeply ingrained American strain of individualism and the authority of personal experience have been a part of the U.S. cultural landscape since long before Vatican II. Before Vatican II, Catholics in the US were walled off from this cultural ethos by the so-called "Catholic ghetto" that resulted from a combination of Protestant anti-Catholicism and Catholic sectarianism. During that period, Catholics maintained coherent religious subcultures with identifiable religious practices performed by the believing community. These practices clearly distinguished them from their Protestant neighbors and the increasing materialism and secularism of the wider late 19th and 20th century America. Since Vatican II, the walls of the Catholic ghetto have crumbled, and most boomers and Generation Xers have moved into the cultural mainstream. The communications and entertainment industries (TV, film, VCRs, DVDs, cell phones, computers) have homogenized the experiences of numerous young people. Typically suspicious of the authority of normative institutions (government, Church, and military), today's young Catholics seem to have special difficulty in recognizing the value of traditional authority and the importance of community rituals (except when they are secular, such as the prom, sporting events, and rock concerts).

DEALING WITH THE LARGER CULTURE

All these developments are not intrinsically bad, as Taylor himself notes when he writes that although our own culture "tends to multiply somewhat shallow and undemanding spiritual options," there is a great cost to forced conformity—namely, "hypocrisy, spiritual stultification" and "the confusion of faith and power" (2002, p. 114). True as these observations may be, for teachers dedicated explicitly to passing on the Catholic tradition to high

school students the choice need not be either "shallow and undemanding spiritual options" on the one hand or "hypocrisy and spiritual stultification" on the other. We offer these responses to our opening question—does research on the millennials suggest any particular emphases in the mission of our Catholic high schools?—trusting that they are vibrant alternatives to both the shallow and the stultified distortions of Catholicism.

We have named this last section of our reflections "Dealing with the Larger Culture." Most studies in the last two decades referred to the transformative force of the "culture" of the school. We are not aware of any studies that describe the characteristics of the larger culture and then ask how a high school with a religious mission should respond to them. Of course, that larger culture is within all of us and typically shapes our presuppositions, as noted earlier. Our students are more or less formed within that culture. Put simply, culture forms the way we think about things and influences how we act. We take affluence for granted until we live among the materially poor. We remain largely unaware of our individualism until we live in, and not just visit, a traditional culture. We struggle to understand why people in other parts of the world hate Americans until we take the time to enter into their experience and frame of mind.

We isolated three characteristics of young people today: their tendency to describe themselves as "spiritual and not religious," their lack of social networks supportive of their faith, and their dissatisfaction with their religious education. Now we pose the question: What initiatives and practices might be recommended to Catholic high school teachers to help their millennial students acquire, in the face of the larger dominant culture, a richer understanding and more consistent practice of their Catholic faith?

BEING SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS

On the positive side, when Gen X and millennial Catholics say they are spiritual, they may be indicating that they have chosen to be on a spiritual journey, albeit an individual one. It may mean that persons consciously reject materialism and consumerism. To the extent that being spiritual but not religious means these things, such persons may well be more mature than some of their peers who seek satisfaction in "shallow and undemanding" weekly connections with the Church. Moreover, if the only exposure to religion is attending a Mass that neither strengthens community nor nourishes spirituality, then young peoples' rejection of religion could be a positive first step toward a more authentic religious practice.

We recommend that schools ensure that communal rituals be an integral part of students' experiences. We have already alluded to secular rituals like sports and proms. We recommend three communal rituals: liturgical celebrations, plays, and leadership training. Liturgical celebrations should be done

frequently and well. Students should be invited to help plan liturgies, but need guidance so that the liturgies do not become performances or exercises in self-expression. The time taken to teach students how to read in public, how to perform liturgical dance (special encouragement is needed in this practice for male students), and how to sing well together, and even in harmony, is time well spent. Celebrants must, of course, have a sense of the community and the particulars of the celebration; otherwise, their presence may seem accidental or even foreign. In our experience, not enough time is devoted to preparing students to celebrate the liturgy.

Second, high school plays frequently do more to strengthen young peoples' self-confidence than any number of pep talks on self-esteem. Finding one's voice on stage, enunciating words carefully, minding the appropriate phrasing of sentences, and developing a rapport with an audience have indelibly marked the lives of many high school students and affected the choices they have made concerning their careers. Plays require individuals to work as a community and to have ready for presentation a creative communal work by a certain date. When the curtain comes down on the last performance, students spontaneously exchange hugs, cry easily and joyfully, and continue long afterwards the friendships they have developed through the play. Though not every play has such an effect, many do.

Third, schools should foster opportunities for students to learn how to lead. Research indicates that, by comparison to public high schools, Catholic schools tend to provide more opportunities for leadership because of their smaller size and the involvement of teachers as moderators for co-curricular activities. We recommend that each semester a school devote a full day to leadership training, perhaps beginning with student council members and heads of student clubs. Older students should work with freshmen. The natural shyness of most adolescents prevents them from recognizing the impact they already have on their peers. Education in the form of Christian leadership will help create a sense of responsibility for the larger community. Liturgical and dramatic rituals will provide students with experiences impossible to generate on their own. Indeed, religious rituals that form community can become a key dimension of the students' communal journey to maturity.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

We wrote earlier of the coherent Catholic subculture characteristic of most Catholics during the first half of the last century. In our view, it is sociologically impossible and theologically unwise to recreate that subculture. The conditions that fostered the Catholic ghetto have changed, and Vatican II has pointed the Church in a new direction. But certain elements of the "old Church" subculture should be recovered.

Catholic high schools should provide students with a language that helps

them understand and express their faith. They need structured opportunities to explore and share their faith. In the pre-Vatican II Church, many high schools had sodalities that met weekly to discuss some aspect of the Christian life. Those sodalities often encouraged what today are called service projects. Not all students were drawn to these groups. However, if the leaders among the students, and not just the popular students, are active in such faith-sharing groups, the impact on the culture of the entire school can be significant. Teachers from many subject areas who choose to moderate such groups can deepen the learning process. It would be a tragic mistake if students at Catholic high schools were not provided the opportunity on a regular basis to nourish and share their faith. Retreats are excellent, especially if faculty and students plan and lead them; the kairos retreat has had a great impact at many high schools. However, without a regular faith-sharing infrastructure, even the powerful impact of a retreat can disappear within weeks or even within a few days.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Finally, why do so many students complain about their religious education? Are such complaints limited only to the courses with collages but without much content that populated many religious education programs after the Council? Is it not the case that a number of students become merely complacent students, *customers* as they are called now in some literature, people who are always "right" and typically bored? Are students so mesmerized by action films that a talking head in front of the classroom is inevitably so s-l-o-w that student attention lags? Perhaps there is some truth in all these explanations.

We suggest, however, that there is no substitute for content, effective presentation, and a well-organized religion curriculum supported by a retreat program, sodalities, and opportunities to lead and serve. Certainly all teachers must be competent, but those who teach religion must in a special way be pedagogically effective. Why? Because teaching religion can be perceived by students as the "same old stuff," which it may well be. Science and math courses obviously build on each other and introduce new material. When a religion curriculum is not well organized and teachers teach mainly what they enjoy teaching, either repetition of material draws student yawns or the lack of curricular organization diminishes student learning. Teachers of religion need special support and regular opportunities to develop themselves professionally. Since the religion course is the one subject that will not be found in a public school, and since it carries a special responsibility in handing on the religious tradition, it ought to be among the best organized, taught, and supported in the school.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that the emerging generation of millennial Catholics is likely to reflect many of the same social and religious tendencies that have been found among post-Vatican II, or Generation X, Catholics. Chief among these are tendencies to view themselves as spiritual without being religious, to be involved in social networks that do not support Catholicism's communal and sacramental culture, and to lack the religious literacy one might hope to find to be theirs. While these tendencies are not entirely bad, they do pose many challenges, especially for faculty and administrators in Catholic schools. As we have reflected on these trends and the challenges they present, we have identified several ways in which Catholic educators might approach high school students belonging to the millennial generation. Our suggestions concentrate on ways of forging links between spirituality and religious practices in the Catholic tradition, building social relations that would increase the plausibility of Catholicism's distinctive culture, and reemphasizing the importance of theological substance while reaffirming the importance of effective communication processes in religious education.

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