

THE CULTURE AND RELIGION OF “GENERATION X” CATHOLICS

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Every generation selects what it wants out of its cultural inheritance. This is usually done polemically, with a sifting of the values handed on and often discarded by the new generation because it is faced by new, yet unmastered possibilities.

At the same time an intelligent and faith-filled pastoral approach will allow a Christian community to receive, celebrate, live and express its faith in its own culture, while still affirming the absolute newness of Revelation in Jesus Christ and the continuing need for conversion which comes from meeting the Savior.

Given these two realities, pastors understandably ask the question: How can one know and effectively minister to the younger generation? Many studies have attempted to answer this question.

More recently in the United States of America, there has been some rather intense inquiries into the generation of Americans known as “Generation X”, “Generation 13” (the 13th Generation in U.S. history), “self- navigators,” or “Generation Expectation.” This generation includes persons born in the years 1961 through about 1980, and makes up about 26% of U.S. adult population. They are more multi-culturally diverse than many previous generations. In many ways this generation appears to be different from the preceding one, as reported by George Barna (1992), Neil Howe and Bill Strauss (1993), Karen Ritchie (1995), the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research (University of Connecticut, 1994), the Brain Waves Group (1996), David W. Machacek and others.

While the number of values each person holds is probably quite large, scholars such as Milton Rokeach and Shalom Schwartz have organized a few of the more important ones into four major spheres—competence, empathy, belonging and hedonism. Each of these in turn consists of two or three specific concepts such as making the world a better place, being a respected member of society, and having power or influence.

1. A Summary of National Profiles

When the 13th Generation were studied in 1996 their values were found to reject tradition and conformity more than the previous three generations. They were seen to share the achievement and power values of the previous generation, but they balance these values with an emphasis on close personal relationships, security and having fun—enjoying life. If asked, many respondents of this generation would say that “it’s up to me to create my own well-being.” They evidently see self-reliance, personal responsibility, as the answer to a fast-changing and often hostile world. Competent-oriented values are key to this generation. They expect to work hard, but they are aware of threats and skeptical of social engineering attempts. Security for them is more important than power. Close relationships are crucially important, and they are building their own reliance networks with others who prove themselves trustworthy allies. Many persons in this generation appear to have concluded that the traditional American formula for happiness simply does not happen for many people—a diploma, a good job, good retirement, *et cetera*. Despite their wariness, they view the present as an era of great opportunity and optimism. There has emerged, too, a new spirituality which has prompted some to re-evaluate their belief systems, especially as they struggle with denominational loyalty in the midst of religious differences.

Some commentators on this generation note the importance of understanding that the 13th Generation's value priorities are not about individualism, a trait more accurately associated with the previous generation. Rather, persons in the 13th Generation are seen as self-reliant because they have to be, but they readily welcome the support of a network of human connections (*communio*).

There appeared many indications that this generation is spiritually hungry, in search of the sacred (the transcendent, the numinous), yearning for a deeper relationship with God, in whom most believe. They seem

ready for genuine Catholic identity, but are handicapped because in many instances they received a deconstructed view of the Church and were catechized inadequately. Moreover, the pragmatism of this Generation X has deeply affected their view of religion. They tend to be persuaded more by what works than by what “ought” to work. Consequently, they look for religion to resonate with their daily lives and those of persons in need. They look for genuineness and integrity in believers who profess Christianity.

2. A Diocesan Profile

During the year 1996 a special effort was also undertaken to achieve the following objectives: (1) identify the values and interests of young adults (18-35 year olds); (2) determine young adults' perceptions of Church and religion; (3) determine how the Church can better involve and minister to young adults today.

a) *Who Are the Young Adults in the Diocese?*

Young adults, especially young singles and married without children, see themselves as being in a period of transition. They struggle to meet others of similar backgrounds and similar interests. As Catholics living in a predominantly Evangelical religious area, young adults regularly talk about their desire to know other young Catholics. Because of their high mobility, they need to find new relationships to replace those of former schools, neighborhoods, and towns. African-American young adults and all young persons resident in rural areas are particularly aware of their sense of isolation and speak strongly of their desire to know other young Catholics.

Although we commonly stereotype this generation as self-confident and outgoing, many have difficulty introducing themselves to strangers. They reported a need for a comfortable setting wherein they experience a sense of belonging.

The normal social patterns of this generation in the three categories of single, those with children, and married without children are so different that they grouped themselves into separate categories. Couples without children reported difficulty in talking and socializing with couples with children. At the point that young couples have children, their concerns focus predominantly on those children and their welfare. Family orientation takes over their daily living.

Economic well-being and the management of time were reported to be concerns for most young adults. Money constraints and needs often have young people working two jobs or more. Hence, they become restricted in their time for social relationships and religious practice. At the same time, they yearn to promote religious values and faith. Some yearn for more intergenerational exchange to enhance faith and its continuing development.

b) *Who Are Young Adults as Catholics?*

In general, the young adults who participated in the diocesan study readily identified themselves as Catholic, have chosen to be Catholic, and are happy being Catholic.

They liked the universal nature of the Church and the sameness in Catholic beliefs and practices which provide a sense of identity and a comfort and familiarity in any Catholic church. In their estimation, the history, traditions, and structures of the Catholic Church give to it stability and strength. The sacraments, ceremonies, rituals, and traditions, further-more, make Catholicism stand out from other religious traditions. The cycle of seasons in the liturgical calendar affords a “completeness in Catholicism”, a different sense of time. The Roman Pontiff and his worldwide endeavors help young adults take pride in the Church.

Frequently in this study, young adults mentioned the great value the Mass has for them. They reported cherishing the Eucharist as the very special occasion of encountering and being in communion with God.

In relationship with people of other faith traditions, young adults reported being targets of the ignorance of others regarding Catholicism. In comparison to older Catholics, they do not see the Church as strict or rigid. They reported seeing this as positive because they say that the Church is “accommodating” itself to the reality

of peoples' lives—inculturation and evangelization.

The 13th Generation Catholics spoke highly of the faith and commitment of local Catholics of previous generations. They contrasted themselves as “not as strict” about religious practices, and more casual about it all. They said they still love and respect their Church very much, but in contrast to their parents' generation they were less “time dedicated” to the Church.

Most of this study's participants expressed that their parents' generation did try to pass on Catholic beliefs to them. Though being Catholic was seen as part of the family culture for some, they emphasized that the Church should realize they are Catholic today because they are choosing it and not because they “have to be” Catholic.

Today's young adults who do attend Church are not comfortable with any attempts in the Church which abandon tradition and structure. They have experienced in their lives the effects of the pendulum swings of deconstructionism-reconstructionism. At the same time, a strict Catholicism of following rules and policies they do not understand does not invite them. While this study's participants expressed traditional Catholic beliefs, their approach to their faith reflects a greater emphasis on human dignity, autonomy, the personal and the practical. Some readers would construe this as “individualism,” but perhaps allowing for the fact that all negative connotations of this doctrine do not apply necessarily in this generation or understanding.

In this vein young adults expressed appreciation for the Church's social teachings and outreach to the poor and needy persons. They viewed the Catholic Church as being less judgmental and condemnatory than other local religions.

Overall, the Catholics of this particular generation reported suffering a need for more education in the Catholic faith. They love the tradition, rituals, devotions and practices of the Catholic faith and see them as distinctive among other Christians. They hunger to know more about Church teachings and practices, and they hope such learning opportunities will be tailored to their culture and spiritualities—a “hands on” learning through theological reflections on direct service and life experiences.

Participants in this study recognized the fact that other Catholics of this generation remain unchurched, untouched and uninterested. Yet, there remained a hope that somehow believers can find a way to reach the alienated young adults and be educated in ways to evangelize them.

c) The Church's Ministry to Young Adults

Young adults frequently expressed their feeling of being lost in the Church, because of their isolation from other people of their own age, the failure of church parishes to include them and their needs in parish ministries, and the low profile given to personal involvement in mission to and in the world by some parishes. Gatherings, networks, relationship building opportunities, learning opportunities related to their life situations, and leisure activities are sought by this generation.

Today's living brings many dilemmas—moral, spiritual, emotional, intellectual—and the guidance that the Church can offer through study groups, informal gatherings, cultural events, Internet and retreats were reported as helpful.

Those of this generation who identify with the Church stated they need leadership to assemble them and to keep them coming together. They said there is a need for someone to organize their gatherings—an expectation also of volunteers in ecclesial ministry today.

This generation is conditioned by the speed of computers and modern communication and transportation. Influenced by such a sense of time, they express a certain ambiguity in their appreciation for the Church's tradition and repetition of the Sacred Eucharistic Liturgy, but become impatient with the slowness of personal and spiritual development and the building of relationships. They remain perplexed that contemporary cultural art forms which speak to them are left unattended by the Church's musicians and artists; that evangelization continues to employ means which are disconnected from their life experiences.

When young adults spoke about what they like about Catholicism, they did so in very traditional terms. They emphasized the Sacraments, especially the Mass, our history and our universality. They expressed

appreciation for the many personal witnesses who have in previous generations demonstrated their faith as fully as they could. Contemporary believers of this generation, the 13th, emphasized personal faith, commitment and the search to understand the reasons why we Catholics believe what we believe, and why we do what we do. As one young study participant observed, his Generation X are “bridging the traditional faith of their grandparents and the excessive individualism they found in some of their parents.”

It remains to be tested further, but one might conclude that the 13th Generation Catholics, at least in this local church, have internalized a model of ideal Catholicism which in many respects is contrary to some deeply ingrained aspects of their own personal faith. The processes of self-discovery, living Catholicism and maturation will help us to learn further about this phenomenon and how it is addressed.

3. Similarities and Differences: National and Local

In the comparing of the national profiles and those of this local church, one sees less rejection of tradition. All of the other dominant values and preferences appear to resonate between national and regional profiles.

Following the previous two generations who esteemed religion less and indicated considerable alienation, Generation 13 members are no less religious and in a number of respects hold that faith is more important in their lives.

Overall, we must conclude that, popular rhetoric notwithstanding, the prognosis for organized religion is quite good, observed David W. Machacek, who presented the study on “Generation X and Religion” at a recent meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. What he found was not a “post-Christian generation,” or a generation trying to make sense of “life after God,” as some contemporary essayists have alleged. Instead, the story of religion in Generation X is one of relative stability.

4. Conclusion

The questions for pastors remain: How can we more effectively bring the Gospel as the Church proclaims it to the young people of the 13th Generation while at the same time attending to the strengths and insights this generation brings? How can we best utilize the personal commitment, the vitality of today's young adults? How can we help young adults develop a style of being Catholic which is totally consistent with the Church's teachings and life, and yet incorporates what is best about young adults for the inculturation of the Church herself?

What has been learned from a national study of Catholic youth ministry program participants (1995-96), recommends to pastors the following:

- 1) Single-dimension programs (*e.g.*, an exclusive sports, catechetical, or any other unique focus) are not as helpful and should not be emphasized as much as comprehensive programs which address a range of needs and interests.
- 2) Young people need more opportunities and training in evangelization and in outreach to alienated persons.
- 3) Young people must be encouraged to participate in parish learning groups, apostolates and charitable activities over many years,
- 4) More effective efforts are needed in teaching young people about vocations, their call in Baptism, and the various ways to serve in *communio*.

These practical considerations for pastors and those who share in parish and diocesan leadership (*e.g.*, the councils) lead of course to the deeper and underlying issues: How can members of Generation X better know and encounter Jesus Christ, the Center of every age and the Anchor for everyone, including the self-navigators? How can the Church better hear and value the voices, signs, metaphors and dreams of people of the 13th Generation?

The answers which are discovered in this local church and in the U.S.A. may well be able to contribute to and be complemented by the younger generations of other local churches and nations, their cultures and

vitality. In the Holy Spirit and nurtured by our Blessed Mother the younger generation (Generation X) and all Christians can truly grow in the life of Jesus Christ. Blessed be His Name.

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