Are They Finding a Place in Our Parishes? Young Adult Catholics and the New Evangelization

by Kathleen M. Mitchell, FSPA

Not long ago a young middle school teacher approached me for help. He was obviously embarrassed and proceeded to tell me he was new to Catholic schools and faced the daunting task of teaching religion to his students, although he knew little about being Catholic. “I’m a Catholic, but I didn’t learn much growing up,” he told me. “I really don’t know what a sacrament is, and I have to teach about seven of them! Can you give me some help?” This kind of encounter with an otherwise well-educated young Catholic is too familiar to me. As an educator I often meet young Catholic teachers like him with little foundation in their faith. The same is often true in my encounters with young people discerning religious life, priesthood, or lay ministry.

There is an urgent need for young adult faith formation, as well as for young adults to be more actively invited and integrated into parish life. As a woman religious, I have worked in various ministries with young adults. I have served as a member of my religious congregation’s vocation team, as a mentor and theological facilitator for Catholics on Call, and, most recently, in parish ministry where I began a young adult group. I have found that young people are unlikely to be able to explain their faith to others. I believe we are facing a crisis because many young adults not only fail to understand what is distinctive about being Catholic but also are ever more distancing themselves from participation in the faith community.

Many young adults that I meet disagree with the Church on numerous issues and question its moral authority, although I encounter a smaller number of more traditional young people committed to a conservative Catholicism. Although many young adults tell me that they disagree with the Church on issues, they are often eager to learn about its traditions and want to build a relationship with Christ. They are frustrated when they don’t find help to grow in their faith or a welcoming parish community that is young-adult responsive and open to listening to their questions and aspirations. It is essential to connect with these young people in a way that is authentic, dialogical, relevant, and meaningful, taking into consideration the challenges and issues of a new generation.

Young adulthood is often a time when individuals try to bring together their personal experience and understandings with what the official Church is asking them to believe. They also face the demands of establishing a professional identity and starting a family. It’s a sad reflection that young adults often face this critical journey alone, without being engaged in conversation or accompanied on their faith journey by those in ministry.

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The New Evangelization

In recent years there has been a great emphasis on the New Evangelization. If carried out well, I believe it could be a positive approach to reaching out to young Catholics, walking with them, sharing faith with them, and entering into a more profound dialogue with them. The new evangelization, one of the clear fruits of the Second Vatican Council, can be traced back to *Ad Gentes* (1965). The expression “new evangelization” has appeared in Latin American documents since at least 1968,¹ and evangelization is a thread that runs through documents such as *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), and the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, leading finally to the Synod on the New Evangelization (2012). Since Latin America provided the original context for the term and the Argentinian Pope Francis comes from this milieu, it will be interesting to witness his insight into the new evangelization.

Pope Benedict XVI placed great emphasis on the new evangelization and, in fact, the twenty-fifth Synod of Bishops was dedicated to “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.” Archbishop Nikola Eterović, Secretary of the Synod, distinguished three senses of evangelization:

1. Evangelization as a regular activity of the Church, directed at practicing Catholics.
2. The mission *ad gentes*, meaning the first proclamation of Christ to non-Christian persons and peoples.
3. New Evangelization as outreach to baptized Catholics who have become distant from the faith.²

The Synod concluded with fifty-eight propositions that focused on the pastoral implications of the faith and the need for the new evangelization. This evangelization is directed at traditionally Christian countries weakened by secularization. There seems to be significantly more emphasis being placed on content, context, and the problem of prevalent secularism, with much less importance being given to using different models or methodologies of evangelization than in the past.

With the new evangelization has come much encouragement to be bold in proclaiming the faith, as well as a pronounced emphasis on what is wrong with the world. The late Avery Dulles once wrote:

> Evangelization is not and has never been easy. Today we tend to blame the prevalent culture for our lack of success. We denounce its individualism, secularism, relativism, hedonism and other vices, which do indeed render the environment unfriendly to the proclamation of the gospel. But we too easily overlook the deep religious hunger that continues to stir in the hearts of contemporary men and women.³

Rather than accentuating this as an era of crisis, something I often hear in relation to the new evangelization, it is important to address the religious hunger that is alive and well in our world today. It’s alive and well among young adult Catholics, too.

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¹ See, for example, the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, *The Church in the Present-Day: Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council, II Conclusions* (Washington, DC: Division For Latin America-USCC), 28. This letter (September 6, 1968) by the bishops of Latin America introduced the conclusions of the Medellín gathering and encouraged a “new evangelization.”


Young Adult Catholics

Young adult Catholics in the United States live in a society that has undergone massive changes in the last fifty years. Unlike members of previous generations, who may have been nurtured by a family and community strongly influenced by a culture of faith, many young people today are not raised in any faith tradition. Contemporary young adults are more likely to be influenced by popular culture and a pervasive individualism. In addition, they often research religion on the Internet, where they have access to unlimited information. Many construct a hybrid religious identity, picking and choosing what suits them, although this is not unique to young adult Catholics.

Recently a young couple preparing to get married approached me, saying they felt uncomfortable going to Sunday Liturgy. I asked them what would help. “There is no one there our age! Everyone has grey hair, and we feel uncomfortable,” they lamented. “We would like to meet other young Catholics like us and talk about things that are important to us.” They were right.

As parish communities, the primary point of contact for most young adults, we often provide very little for persons in their twenties and thirties. There are sacramental programs for children and teens but little that is specifically for young adults. Younger people, therefore, have to invent their own ways of making decisions and of finding support. Often, what drives young adults away is a failure to address the needs that are relevant to their lives. The parish could be a valuable support for young adult Catholics during this time when they are facing difficult decisions and the unsettling pressures of young adulthood.

Recent studies on religious trends in the United States document the steep rise in the number of young adults in the United States who say they are “spiritual but not religious.” Indeed, many young adults have a tenuous relationship with the Catholic Church, jeopardizing its capacity to retain the young. Dean R. Hoge and his co-authors completed a sociological study of young adult Catholics that offers an analysis of this relationship, as well as the attitudes and needs of those in their twenties and thirties. Their book, Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice, reveals a gap in and directly challenges the Church’s efforts at transmitting faith and values to this generation. Their study notes that young adults give a low grade to the church in this area. The authors indicate that young adults seek spiritual meaning in their lives but often draw inspiration from the US spiritual marketplace. They underscore the influence and significance of a highly relativistic, individualistic, pluralistic culture, one that is also suspicious of institutions. The young people in this study stressed the need for the Church to be more welcoming to young adults and more open to dialogue with them. They believe young people should be integrated into the parishes and that programs, faith formation, and activities should be offered for them. They also feel there is a need to dialogue about certain teachings, especially on sexuality, which erode the Church’s credibility among young adult Catholics.

Hoge and his colleagues offered a number of their own suggestions to address the needs of young adult Catholics. Some of their recommendations are building a distinct Catholic identity, enhancing liturgies, offering better faith formation, teaching the rich spiritual traditions of the faith, and having a “preferential option” for young adult

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4 Dean R. Hoge, William D. Dinges, and Mary Johnson, Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).
5 Hoge, Young Adult Catholics, 148.
6 Hoge, Young Adult Catholics, 172–173.
7 Hoge, Young Adult Catholics, 230–231.
Catholics. These recommendations bring to light some of the hopes and aspirations, as well as the issues and concerns, of young adults, casting light on areas the new evangelization needs to address.

Young Adults and the New Evangelization

The new evangelization is not a detailed curriculum or program but an effort and a vision to revitalize and renew Catholics, moving them to a deeper encounter with Christ and fuller participation in the Church. Looking at young adults in particular, the new evangelization is ideally about sharing faith. The fundamentals are important but sharing these can be done in a way that is dialogical, relevant to contemporary young women and men, and speak to our times. World Youth Days, college days of prayer and retreats, and strategies that involve the use of media and technology have been successful, relevant, vibrant, and transformative. An essential part of the new evangelization with young adults is capturing their hearts with stories, images, symbols, and possibilities that grab the imagination and lead to a renewal of faith. It means using transformative models and methodologies.

I followed the recent World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro with great interest, reflecting on the significance of millions of enthusiastic young people gathering to celebrate faith. It brought to mind my 2011 experience of traveling with a group from Chicago to the Madrid World Youth Day. During that week young people gathered for numerous events, such as catechesis, liturgy, reconciliation, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, celebrations of praise and music, and testimonial festivals. There were about 30,000 other US pilgrims with us, as well as several million from around the world. World Youth Days are marked by young people excited to be Catholic and are a testimony to relevant, transformative evangelization that helps young people encounter Jesus Christ in a living community of faith. This is an essential focus of the new evangelization, and I see this happening at World Youth Days. Questions remain, though, about how to carry the enthusiasm from large events like this into the parish, making them springboards for a deeper faith formation that endures beyond the event.

Frequently there is a lack of socialization among young Catholics, who see faith as a private matter. Coming together in small groups of shared faith, especially in parishes, can be a support to young adults and key to helping them become more involved in and committed to their faith. This can also enhance their connection with the larger faith community. It is difficult for people to grow in faith in the absence of a vibrant, welcoming faith community. Small faith groups can be places where young people can raise questions, feel supported, and learn more about their faith.

Today’s world, the only one young people have known, is marked by the explosion of social media. Young adult Catholics will often engage in interaction through social media, even seeking a religious community and relationships of faith. Many questions arise about the quality of these relationships, which sometimes replace a face-to-face faith community. Coming together with others can bring them out of isolation to a safe place where their experiences and issues can be shared. In order to do this, we need dedicated ministers and mentors who can be present for these young people.

I believe that the new evangelization can be positive and lead to a time of grace if we look closely at how we are imagining and engaging in evangelization. Important elements such as dialogue, renewal and reform, respect for others’ beliefs, the role of experience, transformative ways of sharing faith, humility, and a pastoral approach need to be present. This is what our young adult Catholics are hoping to find in the Church: a vibrant faith community and the transformative practice of a living faith.

8 Hoge, Young Adult Catholics, 230–237.