

The Way of St. Francis

*Franciscan
outreach to
young people*

what
tomorrow
looks like

Shaping Young Adults... and Vice Versa

By Maureen K. Day

¶ It is no secret that the Catholic Church is not connecting with large numbers of today's young adults. To pull from some studies, Millennials are more likely than any other generation to say they attend Mass out of habit or to please someone close to them. ¶ A longitudinal study of Catholic teens and young adults found that of the 41 interviewed in the first wave, only a dozen remained engaged in Catholicism to some degree by the second wave. According to Pew Research, just over half of those raised Catholic leave at some point. Only about 20% of these return. Another 20% remain culturally Catholic. The majority of those who leave no longer affiliate with Catholicism.

Inside the Church we are challenged to ask, What gives today's young adults meaning? Where do they find purpose and belonging? What moves them to sorrow or gladness? What are the questions they are asking and how do they want to discover the answers? These questions help us see where the Franciscan tradition and the contemporary young adult experience meet, illuminating places of resonance, connection and relevance.

9 Based upon my experience

with the Franciscan tradition and the world of young adults, there are two meeting places. The first is rooted in being, the second in doing.

For being, I pored over sociological literature on young adults. I reflected on my own recently ended young-adult years, on my time teaching undergraduates, on the contributions within my own book on young adults, *Young Adult American Catholics*. I wanted to distill a phrase that best captures the most essential aspects of adults 19-39 years old today. I landed on this: Young adults are characterized by “an expressive authenticity that seeks belonging.”

To break that down a bit and starting with the middle of the phrase, young adults prize authenticity. There is a sense that the core

and the details of each person are unique, beautiful and worthwhile. To be true to that, whatever that is, is critical. To find one's self requires vulnerability. To stray from it will stifle gifts (and frailties) meant to be joyfully shared with others, ultimately frustrating one's own happiness too. We all win when we are being authentic.

Returning to the beginning of the phrase, young adults look to express that authenticity. A person's authentic self is good news that should be shared. That will look different for different people. This could manifest in arts or crafts, through styles of dress, within lifestyle choices, through music or poetry, in home decorating, in gift-giving, through occupational choices: Every domain of human life affords an opportunity for expression. The lesson? You are a gift worth giving.

Finally, belonging reminds us that this expressive authenticity is not to be misunderstood as individualism. Instead, truest individuality emerges through our relationships



9 Millennials are the most diverse generation in

with others. In community we are grounded, accepted, challenged, consoled, celebrated. Far more than being welcomed into a parish or other organization, young adults want to know they belong in a thicker sense. Belonging shapes imagination and provides affection.

When I reflect on this expressive-authenticity-seeking-belonging, I realize this is also embedded in the Franciscan tradition. Francis and those who followed him embraced each of these pieces. For example, authenticity courses through the “Canticle of the Sun,” in which creation praises God by being exactly as it is. The Franciscan tradition emphasizes the beauty of our humanness and the pursuit of self-mastery.

The evangelical impulse of the Order is a testimony to its expressiveness, inviting us to manifest a vision in the whole of our lives. Trinitarian belonging is palpable, whether in religious and secular communities, or in other ministries grounded in radical kinship.

The second meeting place, that of doing, is storytelling. The Franciscan tradition is a tradition of storytelling. But the magical quality to stories is that they do not merely relay information. More powerfully, they put a frame of meaning around an event. In telling and in hearing stories, people are gathered, belief systems are evoked, values are contested or reinforced, emotions are encouraged, new realities are imagined. Stories communicate meaning and identity.

U.S. history. They are also the first generation to have high school service hours as a near-universal experience. They understand difference and perspective and they know that everyone has a story. They want to tell theirs and they want to hear others’ too. To share stories is to be vulnerable and provide a window into the already amid the not-yet. Stories can turn strangers into friends.

Storytelling is the method the Franciscan tradition might connect to and grow with young adults. Instead of asking how can we minister to or with young adults, Franciscan know-how asks, How can we connect with young adults? What of our tradition resonates with their lives? Where do our experiences share mutual relevance?

The Franciscan family has a unique cultural availability and receptivity to meet today’s young adults in ways that will be meaningful for both. This *simpatico* and reciprocity can be inviting for those involved as well as for those beyond. Let’s begin the encounter. ❖

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