

Mentorship and Young Adults

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SEE

According to developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, young adults must negotiate a conflict of “Intimacy vs. Isolation”; it is in these years that young adults formulate, ask, and answer, “Will I be loved, or will I be alone?” Young adults both pursue and move away from particular romantic relationships, friendships, professional connections, and faith communities as they attempt to balance their needs of love, intimacy, support, and affirmation. In addition to this navigation of relational ties, young adults also face the task of “differentiation of self” as they move into more public, adult roles outside of their families of origin. Young adults struggle to negotiate both “making room” for new identities that come from stepping out from their families of origin, as well as “keeping room” for the traditions, cultures, beliefs, and practices of their family of origin to anchor them through this fluctuating period of identity development. According to psychologist Meg Jay, 80% of life’s most defining moments and decisions will take place before age 35. Young adults make decisions that will impact the rest of their lives: marriage, career, friendships, family ties. Using Catholic language, we can call young adulthood “the age of discernment.”

Recent studies combined with our own experience working in young adult ministry professionally reveal three related challenges that typify the lived experience of young adult Catholics today: a crisis of trust, increasing isolation and anonymity, and absence of structures that facilitate relationships. This generation is proposing a Copernican shift with regard to the reference point for our trust: away from institutions toward personal relationship.ⁱ This fact has affected virtually every social entity and sphere of life in the last forty years. Trust in institutional authority- from the presidency to big business- has dropped radically in the last 4 decades.ⁱⁱ Young people are finding alternate “spaces” for decision making outside large institutions. The office of Young Adult Ministry for the Archdiocese of Washington reported similar findings following the spring 2017 “Share with Francis” consultation for the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment.ⁱⁱⁱ Data on a local and national level suggest that the Catholic Church is facing a crisis of relational authority. Nearly 50% of weekly and daily mass goers reported not having a single friend at Church and desiring a relationship with a mentor in the faith-but were unable to find one. Our places of liturgy are empty of relational structures and leave young people feeling anonymous. In this climate, young people are finding it increasingly difficult to find points of reference for questions of faith.

JUDGE

As young adults’ identities are formed and worked over by the combination of their lived experience in the past and present, expectations and hopes for the future, changing social relationships, and deeper and more intimate romantic relationships, they must find points of reference in the midst of the chaos of change and transition. Woven in the fabric of salvation history is a narrative of a God personally invested, loving beyond expectation, and extending his

mercy to his beloved through embodied signs- a people who very concretely, like young adults, wander restlessly through changing relationships, locations, and identities. To his wandering people Israel, God provides many signs of his presence, such as a pillar of fire, a burning bush, and the prophets, to guide and call them further and further along the Way. God's active presence among his people culminates in the Incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ, who is the very sign of the Father's commitment to his people.

This narrative of embodiment of God's presence through various signs provides a theological and pastoral response to the condition of young adults: the embodied ministry of the presence of God's love through mentorship. Many young adults have been raised as "spiritual orphans" in the back pews of our parishes. We must shift away from the temptation to focus on programs and curriculum to the exclusion of relationships and the enduring force of holy mentorship. Saints make saints. Ignatius mentored Francis Xavier, Monica's witness and prayers converted Augustine, and Clare followed Francis. The absence of relatable mentors lies at the heart of our crisis of holiness and vocations.

ACT

What is our response to this sobering reality? Our evangelizing response is not a memorized answer but the witness of "a Person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (Pope Benedict XVI). The New Evangelization of young people must be Christocentric, offering Christ to the world as a living Person through the spiritual friendship of each of the baptized living as "another Christ". The formation of young people today depends on the relational authority of a personal and kerygmatic witness, an apprenticeship in Christian living that no textbook can replicate. This echoes the prophetic voice of Blessed Pope Paul VI who reminds us that "modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if does listen to teachers it is because they are witnesses."

Our parishes must rethink existing structures and models of ministry, reconstituting them around the principle of relational trust and mentorship. We must invest our personal and financial resources around initiatives such as small group communities, formalized mentorship programs, retreats, spiritual direction, hospitality, post-RCIA/marriage/baptism accompaniment. We need to find innovative "spaces" of making the Church present to people, including leaving the physical structure of the Church to bring Christian living into farmers markets, gyms, apartment complexes and neighborhoods. We must be a Church that dreams big by starting small, investing in one-on-one relationships and prioritizing programs and events that help us get to know young adults by name. Parishes often ask parishioners about how they are being good stewards of their 'time, talent, and treasure'. The parish, too, must undergo this examination of conscience:

- How many hours a week do priests and lay people spend time in mentorship relationships with young people?
- How many young people are in decision making leadership roles in our parish?
- How much of our financial resources are given to supporting young people inside and outside the church walls?

-How many young people in our parish do we know by name?

Oscar Romero said: “you say you love the poor, name them”. Today we must say to priest, ministry leaders and all the people of God: “you say you love young people, name them.”

ⁱ As one New York Times Op Ed columnist commented, describing his experience interviewing millennials on college campuses:

I found little faith in large organizations. ‘I don’t believe in politicians; they have been corrupted. I don’t believe in intellectuals; they have been corrupted,’ said one young woman at Yale. I asked a group of students from about 30 countries which of them believed that the people running their country were basically competent. Only one young man, from Germany, raised a hand. “The utopia of our parents is the dystopia of our age,” a Harvard student said, summarizing the general distemper.”

It is important to note that young adults are not avoiding the search for meaning and the basis for decision making and commitment; rather, they are finding new and innovative ways to engage in politics, business, education and health. Organized religion is facing the same challenge, the same crisis in trust (even more so in the last 6 months) among young adults.

WHERE ARE YOUR PEOPLE?

Confidence in Institutions			
<u>Institution</u>	<u>Alternative</u>	<u>1970s</u>	<u>Today</u>
Big Business	Buy Local Movement	26%	18%
The Medical System	Homeopathic Medicine	80%	39%
The Presidency	Political Outsiders	52%	36%
Television News	Niche News	46%	21%
Congress	Local Control	42%	9%
Newspapers	Social Media	39%	20%
Public Schools	Homeschool	58%	30%
Banks	Cash Only Budgets	60%	27%
Organized Religion	?????	65%	41%



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ⁱⁱⁱ In a survey of young adults, most of whom attended mass weekly, many *daily*, the following was discovered:

- Only 45% of young adults say that their parish relates well to young adults
- Only 55% of young adults have a close friend at their parish
- Only 50% of young adults have a relationship with an older adult mentor at their parish