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A journey of faith with youth

Obinna Ifeanyi CSSp

Most scholars, educators, writers, religious, clerics and those involved in one way or another with faith promotion among youth have observed that there has been a sharp decline of interest in organised religion among them, whereas their interest in spirituality is on the rise. Reginald W. Bibby and Donald C. Posterski noted in their book: *Teen Trends: a Nation in Motion*, that significant change is occurring in five major areas: 1. Relationships 2. Values 3. Marriage and Parenthood 4. Sexuality and 5. Religion. *“The majority of young people in Canada are sending a sobering message to those who value organised religion. Attendance continues to decline and participation in youth groups is low. Relatively few teenagers place much value on religious involvement. In the minds of the vast majority of young people, religion is something that is marginal to everyday life. Still holding on to their religious legacy, however, young people expect to use the services of the country’s religious institutions for ceremonial purposes — marriages, births, and deaths.”*

Amongst young Christians, their sense of belonging is marked by a lack of commitment. While they may identify themselves as Christians, engagement with the activities of their religion is only marginal. It is, perhaps, worthwhile to point out that many identify themselves as Christians when they come seeking letters of recommendation for a job in a Catholic school or hospital.

As someone involved in youth ministry, I pay attention to diverse viewpoints regarding the causes of this decline in religious involvement. One viewpoint maintains that the social media is responsible for the decline of youth interest in face-to-face encounters where people come together to share their faith. They prefer to socialize in virtual groups with others. It is claimed that this pattern is symptomatic of an overly individualistic generation. The “me-oriented generation” considers the role of organised religions as outdated.

Hopeful moments

While it is true that the breath-taking changes of communications technology have affected young people, it is relevant to note that these young people, while not necessarily as religious as their parents' generation, are still very deeply spiritual. Working with them, I notice that they believe very strongly in the idea of a God behind all there is, that life has a purpose, that being compassionate, just, and true to one's inner self are worthwhile goals to pursue. Youth, like all people, operate in keeping with the zeitgeist. They are not from another planet, but they have that perennial hunger for what is greater and higher than them.

Non-practising parents

Another viewpoint attributes the decline to the religious laxity of their parents. Children being raised by non-practicing Catholics, for instance, are unlikely to be committed to the faith. As a matter of interest, even committed Christians have difficulty finding time to nurture their kids in a religious environment because they have to put food on the table and pay the bills. In order to make ends meet, some parents have to do two or three jobs most days of the week, including Sundays.

“The only opportunity I have to attend Mass is when we celebrate here at school.”

One of my students told me this: “My parents do two to three jobs. While Mom works on Sundays, Dad makes Sunday sleep/rest day for the family. The only opportunity I have to attend Mass is when we celebrate here at school.” The challenge of coping with the financial pressures of providing for one's children is obviously taking a toll on the family's role in helping to nurture the faith of their children. To make any significant headway with young people, the Church has to re-examine the role of parents and family as partners and helpers in the cultivation and nurturing of religious faith.

Religion at odds with young people's values

Some faith promotion programmes portray youth as a generation that sees the core moral teachings of religion at odds with the values many young people live by. Implicitly, religious institutions will have to change their moral doctrines and values if they want to attract youth.

Andy Blanks, a blogger and the co-founder of youth-ministry360, asserts that *“The tide of culture is not changing ... it has changed. And if we are not actively and intentionally structuring our programming and philosophy to meet it, we will increasingly find ourselves and our ministries irrelevant.”*

Obinna Ifeanyi CSSp at World Youth Day in Madrid: “I am a hopeful Catholic.”



I asked my students why they themselves seem nonchalant about organised religions. Some of the answers I got from them include: approving premarital sex, being more accepting of parenthood outside marriage, divorce, abortion, and homosexuality. Quoting an old axiom, one of them said, “Father, guns don't kill people — religion kills people. Check the history of the wars fought and still being fought.” In order to avoid the “rigid” requirements demanded from them by organised religion, most young people prefer to distance themselves from religion, consequently describing themselves as spiritual as opposed to religious.

I am a hopeful Catholic

So, what is my opinion on all of this? Much as I give credit to some of these faith formation organisations for the useful and insightful issues they raise, I refuse to embrace their pessimistic take on the attitude of youth toward religion today. I am a hopeful Catholic, and my experience of youth in the last World Youth Days (WYD) in Madrid has solidified my stance that a lot of young people are both spiritual and religious. Madrid 2011 was my first WYD experience. It was thanks to the Youth Mission from St Theresa Shrine of the Little Flower Parish in Scarborough, Ontario, that I got the opportunity of attending the event.

Prior to my experience in Madrid, I had always assumed that WYD, apart from the Masses celebrated, was another kind of social picnic for youth, deficient in strong spiritual and catechetical depth. Was I wrong? Yes, I was indeed!

I experienced a group of boys and girls (approximately 1.5 million) standing up to defend and express their faith in the midst of an ever-hostile attack from the secular world.

I experienced a Catholic gathering with strong catechetical and spiritual programs designed to uplift and strengthen the faith of youth.

I experienced young boys and girls, who in normal circumstances (as I thought), give up and go home at any inconvenience to their comfort, keen to walk in groups for miles and miles to attend all the religious activities and gatherings arranged for them. Even when I felt tired of walking, the palpable faith, spirit and strength of the young revitalized my will. I kept walking.

Several moments in Madrid continue to keep me hopeful about the religious disposition and commitment of young people toward the Church. One of those moments was the



Members of the Youth Mission from St Theresa Shrine of the Little Flower Parish in Scarborough, Ontario, at World Youth Day in Madrid.

courage, civility and devotion with which, in spite of the treacherous August heat, they stood to counter the anti-Papal protest organised by the train workers. I also found it nourishing, enriching and edifying to see young people in their hundreds of thousands from different continents, countries, races, and ethnicities united in their Catholic faith, holding hands, praying the rosary and singing religious songs in defence of their faith against the organised protest in Madrid.

Comfortable to wear his faith on his sleeve

I asked one of the United States participants that I met at a restaurant his opinion of the whole WYD experience. He revealed that for once, he felt comfortable to wear his faith on his sleeve without apologies to anyone as opposed to the situation in the United States where the prevailing culture of political correctness makes it appear inappropriate for people to publicly express their faith. According to him, “to be seen as religious by some of your peers is tantamount to being seen as abnormal. But here we all share and profess proudly the same faith without being judged or considered exclusionists.”

Another faith-enriching moment for me was when I watched millions of young boys and girls with the Pope and the hierarchy of the Church stand resolute, prayerfully, joyfully and faithfully worshipping their God in spite of the torrential rainfall that poured down on the Day of Adoration.

A meaningful youth forum every year?

Given that WYD comes around every two or three years, we need to ask ourselves what are we doing as a Church to sustain the high level of enthusiasm young people brought and experienced in Madrid? Should we always wait for two to three years to gather the youth or should our parishes and dioceses be encouraged to organise a meaningful youth forum every year that will climax with WYD? What of the involvement of youth in parishes and Church committees where they feel their voice is heard and respected?

Confirmation is done in Grade 7/8 and the next sacrament is Marriage, which often happens after college/university — so, what happens sacramentally from high school to college/university? Do we not think it is time for the Church to have a serious and meaningful dialogue with youth in our parishes and dioceses?

Perhaps we need to seek new ways of making the Mass livelier and engaging, more attractive for young people who, for the most part, perceive it as “boring and exclusive”. From my experience as a youth minister, many think the Mass is centred on the priest, keeping the congregation aloof. We need to give

“To be seen as religious by some of your peers is tantamount to being seen as abnormal.”

them more avenues for participating in the liturgy. One of my students once said, “It seems priests enjoy celebrating Mass for themselves instead of for the people.”

Challenged by this perception, I had to find ways to make the Mass more engaging, participatory and lively for them while stressing its sacredness. Having used that approach on several occasions, I observed that it improved their interest and participation in the Mass. Tailoring the liturgy to capture the interest of young people is an unavoidable task the Church must accomplish. In this connection, it is worthwhile to commend the Vatican for publishing the new Youth Catechism (YouCat) “written in language suitable for young people.”

While we wait for better and new ideas that are youth-oriented, it is vital for the church to acknowledge the importance of the youth entrusted to her care and to review carefully her responsibility to nurture their spiritual growth. Let us remember what Pope Benedict said: “*The youth of today are not as superficial as some think.*” ■