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## The Millennials

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## A new generation, a new interest in religious life

It seems that out of the ashes of September 11, Americans have gotten religion. The news media has made much of increased church attendance (up by as much as 10 percent) and increased demand for church counsel. Lately the airwaves are filled with people's stories of soul-searching, their fresh desire for meaning in life. Can an upswing in religious vocations be far behind?

Who knows? I'm skeptical about trendiness when it comes to religious experience. And I have my doubts about any nation that invokes God's blessing while sending soldiers forth to make war. Nonetheless, a new openness toward religious vocations has been emerging for quite some time. Even if the nation is *not* re-examining its soul right now, the fact is Catholic young people *are* exhibiting signs of new interest in church vocations.

When HORIZON contributor John Merkelis, OSA called to tell me about a successful high school discernment program he was running, he told me this: "My predecessor in vocation min-

istry says he used to get laughed out of the high schools. No one wanted to hear about being a priest, sister or brother." But now the students John meets want to learn more. They're open to the possibility of religious life. And they were so inclined even before the world catapulted into the uncertainty of the war on terrorism.

Clearly, there has been a shift in the generations. Gen X's coolness toward institutional religion is not as widely shared by younger people. As HORIZON contributor Mary Bendyna, RSM points out in her article, Catholic youth show signs of openness and interest toward the church and toward religious vocations.

It's up to all of us in the church to "teach our children well" about vocations. We do so realizing that no matter what a generational profile may look like, each person is an individual. No one is a sociological robot. We work, we pray, we guide—and God does the rest.

—*Carol Schuck Scheiber, Editor*

# Vocation issues raised by younger candidates

by Father Raymond P. Carey

Over the last several decades, vocation and initial formation ministers have experienced rather profound shifts in underlying philosophies and strategies for ministry. Pre-Vatican II programs generally operated from a somewhat rigid, traditional discernment/training approach for all participants. The humanistic revolution of the 60s and 70s turned vocation and formation ministers into virtual concierges, attending to individual needs of each person. The 80s continued that pattern with a slow pendulum swing back to a bit more structure, and even discipline, into the 90s. All indications point to a revolutionary shift in philosophy and practice to welcome late Gen X'ers (those born after 1978) and the Millennials (born in and after 1982) to vocational discernment and formation.

This article identifies some practical strategies that may help guide the design of vocation and formation ministry for the present generation of younger candidates. I suggest some distinctions about community, some special assessment and initial formation concerns with younger candidates, as well as some ethical concerns with younger candidates.

## Who are the Millennials?

In their book, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, Howe and Strauss (2000) suggest that the Millennial persona has seven distinguishing traits, traits that represent a sharp break from the traits associated with Generation X.

First, the Millennials are special. The children's agenda has been at the top of virtually every political speech in the last decade. Millennials have been taught, and have accepted, that they are special and vital to our future.

Second, the Millennials are sheltered. Concerns about child abuse, child safety, and the post Columbine lock down have produced the most supervised youth in our history.

Third, the Millennials are confident. Not only have they happily connected with their parents, they have also begun to see themselves as very good news for our future.

Fourth, the Millennials are team-oriented. The Gen X emphasis on "too cool to care" individualism seems to have given way to cooperation, interdependence and confidence about the importance of tighter peer bonds.

Fifth, the Millennials are achieving. As Howe and Strauss put it, "The Millennials are on track to become the best educated and best behaved adults in the nation's history" (p.44).

Sixth, the Millennials are pressured. The down side of all the hopes and confidences invested in the Millennials is their experience of extraordinary pressure to excel.

Seventh, the Millennials are conventional. Demonstrating a sharp break from the Gen X way, Millennials

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als take pride in improving their behavior and they easily and openly embrace their parents' values.

For all these reasons, and for many more, vocational ministry with Millennials must necessarily take on a very different look.

### **Critical distinctions regarding community**

Father Gaston Lessard, SM, (2001), a Marist scholar from Quebec, has suggested that religious communities may well benefit from distinguishing community, common life and *communio* in assessing candidates' attractions to religious life. Those same distinctions may yield helpful data as well regarding the present state of any given congregation.

**The data with a younger candidate is almost always less robust than one would expect with an older candidate. Data around such issues as compassion, sensitivity, "willingness," for example, generally will be far less compelling than one would find with a more seasoned candidate.**

Community, a psycho-sociological concept, refers to the experience of belonging to a specific group with whom one shares common mission, vision and goals. Further, one belongs in the sense that part of one's self understanding is rooted in one's affiliation with this group. As well, one enjoys being part of the group and being welcomed where every other member of the group lives or works.

Common life, a juridical concept, refers to sharing a common roof, a prayer schedule, meals and bonds of friendly support and mutual encouragement. More specifically, common life refers to expectations that one will physically and spiritually share daily life with others.

*Communio*, a theological concept, refers to the enterprise of grace in which people grow together in one mind and one heart in the spirit of Jesus Christ, and in sharing the mission of Jesus in announcing the cheering news of God's salvific love. Further, *communio* refers to the authentic joyful fidelity one shares with oth-

ers who proclaim faith in Jesus the Christ, and express that faith in celebration of the supper of the Lord.

A key application of these distinctions is identifying what, specifically, a candidate may be seeking in discerning a religious vocation. With later Gen Xers' and Millennials' emphasis on team orientation, they may very well want all three components of Lessard's distinctions. A further consideration is whether all three are available in one's own congregation.

### **Assessment concerns with younger candidates**

In addition to all the data that one would gather in a routine behaviorally based vocation assessment interview, there are several special assessment concerns with younger candidates.

First, the data with a younger candidate is almost always less robust than one would expect with an older candidate. Data around such issues as compassion, sensitivity, "willingness," for example, generally will be far less compelling than one would find with a more seasoned candidate. As well, younger candidates generally filter their ministerial and other experiential data through the self, as opposed to its benefit and meaning for others.

Another reality with younger candidates is that problems are harder to identify. Because of their own developmental needs, for example, late adolescent self absorption may be hard to differentiate from narcissism. Additionally, late adolescent discovering of limits with regard to alcohol consumption may mask an addiction problem. Further, problems with authority may be hard to distinguish from normal developmental backlash. As well, the whole complicated process of identifying one's psychosexual orientation may be exacerbated by challenges of late adolescence.

A further aspect of working with this generation is that recommendations to formation personnel tend to be shorter term with younger candidates. The recommendations also need to be interactive with younger candidates, and modified frequently. A congregation's admissions criteria may also shift radically in dealing with younger candidates. There is a common sense appeal to the notion that one expects less of a college seminarian, for example, than one expects of one ready for graduate theological study.

Finally, it seems that with Millennial candidates, religious communities and dioceses may well need to address how, specifically, the receiving community expects to be

changed by younger members. Younger candidates do expect to make a difference, and far sooner than their elders in the enterprise did. At Mt. Angel Seminary in Oregon, for example, transitional deacons are often appointed pastors of parishes (with missions) shortly after ordination to priesthood.

While bearing in mind all of these differences, it seems important to caution against stereotyping Millennials. We cannot set up self fulfilling prophecies by expecting to find these trends in each younger candidate. A fundamental principle of competent assessment is to seek and expect unique individual differences.

### **Implications for formation**

Accepting younger candidates into formation will require some substantive modifications to programs. Several suggestions follow.

First, formation will (once again) need to accommodate and address developmental issues. Such issues include self-esteem development, psychosexual development, and acquisition of commitment skills. Communities may also need to address career education of younger candidates. And they may want to develop support networks with other young people.

With younger candidates entering, there will need to be greater vigilance in regard to predators in the community. We have always had predators who either use candidates for their own sexual gratification or see candidates as fodder for their own manipulative and maladaptive behavior.

Formation programs may do well to facilitate the telling of congregational tales and stories to younger candidates. Most religious communities and dioceses have wonderful lore, filled with funny, courageous, outrageous or otherwise interesting stories of sisters, brothers and priests who precede the young into formation. Without hearing these stories, how else will our younger candidates acquire the tradition and culture? Certainly “origins and constitutions” classes in novitiates will not suffice.

Formation, especially with Millennials, will need to be a time for inquiry and exchange, not just a set program. In short, our Millennials may well want to be the formation team!

Another generational characteristic for vocation and

formation teams to keep in mind is that most Millennials have been “special.” How will vocation and formation programs address that? These young people have had a clear sense of entitlement, and they’ll expect vocation and formation ministers to “be there” for them.

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Another reality is that younger candidates seem to be far more team oriented than Gen Xers. How will our formation programs accommodate the shift from individualism to a team approach? For one thing, this may mean a far more serious commitment to intercommunity novitiate programs. It may also suggest more linkage with young singles in faith communities and parishes. In any case the “lone ranger” formation enterprise may well be a thing of the past. Howe and Strauss describe the typical Millennial manner: they function “by organizing it themselves, by bearing witness collegially, and focusing on team deed-doing ahead of solitary spirituality” (p. 234).

Besides being team players, most teens have a five-to-10-year plan. How will vocation and formation ministers address that? Any plans for younger candidates’ futures may do very well to address the plans the candidates already bring with them to formation.

In general, formation will need to be a truly spiritual experience, not primarily a psychological one. Formation will need to focus on the centrality of the person of Jesus the Christ. Additionally, there will need to be a deepening of Catholic culture and perhaps even evangelization.

The old axiom, “formation is not a time for evangelization” may no longer be helpful. While many Millennials have been used to opting for subjective knowledge over propositional truth (Dinges, W., et al., 1998), there seems as well to be a hunger for their Catholic faith content.

Another reality to keep in mind is that our Millennials, a very trustworthy group on the whole, have a clear sense that their faith involves social justice concerns as well as sacramental life (Dinges, W., et al. 1998). Clearly any efficacious formation program will need a social justice focus, and it will need to be theoretical as well as practical.

Finally, Millennials are used to authority and have found it largely a positive experience. Their karate instructors, coaches and teachers have given them respect for rules, authority and procedures. Our formation ministers need to channel this openness in positive, courageous and loving ways.

### **Ethical concerns with younger candidates**

In addition to all the ethical concerns one would have with any candidate, e.g., clarity of agency, confidentiality, fiduciary trust, there are some nuanced ethical concerns with younger candidates.

First, there are ethical issues with acceptance. Accepting younger candidates suggests we embrace responsibility to be involved in their career choices, their right to vector their lives in whatever direction they choose, and their need for help in acquiring adult decision making skills.

Second, it will be economically expensive to accept younger candidates, make no mistake about it. They will need to be educated in an increasingly expensive world. As well their educational tools are expensive, including computers and Internet access as well as exorbitantly expensive university textbooks and scientific calculators.

Third, it seems to be a moral imperative that our communities and dioceses address the anger of current membership. I am speaking specifically of those on the margins of our communities, those with the perception of limited options in their own lives. As well, I am speaking of those who have, even publically, stated that they themselves would never encourage a young person to join a religious community or become a diocesan priest today.

Relatedly, we have to be ethically accountable to the question “why do we want new members?” (Bertrand, 1997). Further, and realistically, how open are current members to being changed by new members? How open is the community or diocese to enculturation in every regard?

In sum, from all indications, our church is entering a wonderful new time of grace and favor, part of which includes this gift of the Millennial Generation. We seem to be on the cusp of a new source of growth and development. That is going to require serious retooling of how we have gone about the enterprise of vocation

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and formation ministry. Put another way, paraphrasing Howe and Strauss (2000), we can no longer say that we understand 18-21 year olds because, after all, we were once 18-21. +

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# Ministering to the Millennials

by Robert J. McCarty

When Hurricane Mitch devastated Nicaragua, the lack of accurate maps was one of the major obstacles relief agencies faced in a land where rivers had changed banks, roads were non-existent, and entire towns had been swept away. A smaller hurricane traveled up the east coast of the United States, and the force of the ocean surge leveled some sand bars and created new ones off the point of Long Island. Today you can watch yachts become grounded on those new sand bars because the nautical maps were not updated.

Maps are only effective if they match the territory one is trying to navigate. When the territory changes, we have to be humble enough to adjust our maps. The “territory” of young people and church is changing dramatically with this Millennial Generation. If our ministry is to be effective, we have to examine our maps and adjust where necessary.

This article has two objectives. The first is to examine the current “territory” by describing the social and spiritual characteristics of the Millennial Generation, those young people born since 1982. The second objective is to identify some of the elements of a “map” for ministry with the Millennials.

## The territory

The image we have of young people determines how we respond, how we minister, how we relate to them, and the type of services we provide them. *US News and World Report*, April 17, 2000, suggested that the dominant image portrayed in the media is teenager-as-outcast. Youth are certainly more likely to be seen as a problem to be solved rather than as a gift to be shared.

However, many young people today do not reflect the popular stereotype in several important categories:

*Service:* Twenty-five percent of youth regularly perform community service; 40 percent are involved in occasional service, and they have the highest rate of volunteerism in our society. Teenagers contributed 2.1 billion hours of service to their communities in 1996 and 1997. Three million youth and young adults participated in National Service Day in April 1999.

*Crime:* Teen violent crime has dropped almost 30 percent in the last 10 years, according to FBI statistics.

*Drug use:* Drug use, drinking, and deaths from drunk driving have all decreased significantly.

*Sex:* Teen pregnancy has dropped significantly and the rate is at a 40-year low, representing a 21 percent drop since 1991.

*School:* Drop out rates have declined, especially for African Americans, and more and more young people are going to college. SAT scores are up from two decades ago, even adjusting for recalibration of tests.

But, despite these gains, Robert Blum, director of the adolescent health program at the University of Minnesota, says, “What is distinctively different for today’s teenagers is the level of cultural negativity they’re exposed to ... from sexuality in the media to the prevalence of violence and family dysfunction. Their exposure to risk is so far beyond what other generations

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have dealt with.” Our young people are confronted with some major challenges:

*Poverty:* One in five children is born into poverty, living in poor neighborhoods and attending poor schools. A growing issue is the “digital divide,” denoting the difference in access to technology between poor and non-poor youth and families.

*Juvenile justice:* Kids are being treated more harshly today. The number of youth in adult facilities has doubled since 1985 and the age at which young people are being charged as adults is steadily dropping. Recently there was discussion in a state legislature about making 14-year-olds eligible for the death penalty.

**It is helpful to remember that the young people with whom and to whom we minister today don't have some of the formational experiences that influenced us.**

*Adult disconnect:* Increasingly, young people are disconnected from the adult world. Many youth lack the opportunity or settings to form relationships with adults, even in their schools and families. Young people have been described as “A tribe apart” by Patricia Huesch, living and acting in their own world, with their own social systems and mores, devoid of adult contact.

Yet, the majority of youth cope successfully with these stresses, and they owe that in large part to the adults in their lives. Young people who feel connected to school, family, and church are better protected from violence, suicide, sexual activity, and substance abuse. SEARCH Institute in Minneapolis has found that young people who are involved in church are half as likely to engage in at-risk behavior.

It is helpful to remember that the young people with whom and to whom we minister today don't have some of the formational experiences that influenced us. Beloit College in Wisconsin provided faculty with a list of insights about the incoming freshman class, quoted by Richard McBrien in the March 24, 2000 issue of the *National Catholic Reporter*. Following is a sample of those insights about the college class of 2004.

- They have no meaningful recollection of the Reagan era.
- They were 11 when the Soviet Union broke apart, and they do not remember the Cold War.
- They have never feared a nuclear war.
- They were too young to remember the space shuttle blowing up.
- Tiananmen Square means nothing to them.
- Their lifetime has always included AIDS.
- The Vietnam War is as remote to them as World War I, World War II, and the Civil War.
- They have no idea that Americans were ever held hostage in Iran.

However, the national and international events occurring during their generation have had tremendous impact on the world in which these young people will come of age.

- Discovery of Aids (1981)
- Challenger Disaster (1986)
- Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989)
- Soviet Union Dissolution (1991)
- Persian Gulf War (1991)
- Free Elections in South Africa (1993)
- Oklahoma City Bombing (1995)
- Columbine High School Massacre (1999)
- Day of Terrorism in the USA (2001)

And it's not just the events that characterize the territory. The list of major inventions during their brief lifetimes heralds the age of technology.

- Video Games, Nintendo
- Microsoft Windows
- VCR
- Camcorder
- CDs
- Explosion of cable TV
- Cellular phones
- Fax machine
- Internet
- E-mail
- Satellite dishes
- 2001 Worldwide Satellite Network

Young people today know computers the way their parents knew the TV. Technology and globalization have affected economics, politics, education, and religion significantly. This is a much different world

than the one in which the current generation of Baby Boomers and Post Moderns were born.

### **Characteristics of the Millennial Generation**

The key events in the lives of the Millennials shape their worldview, and it is helpful to contrast their perceptions with those of the Baby Boomer generation, those born between 1945 and 1964, since Boomers comprise many of those who minister to the Millennials. The following are certainly brief generalizations, but they do enable a better understanding of the generational differences.

A critical difference is in their perceptions of the future. Coming to age during the nuclear arms race and the Cold War, many Baby Boomers easily anticipated an apocalyptic ending, the world blowing up in a nuclear holocaust. The Millennials, growing up in a different world, are more concerned about a breakdown of the social, economic, and political systems. They rely more on their network of friends, acknowledging their need for others, rather than on institutions. “I’ll be there for you” states the theme song from the Millennial television show, “Friends.” And Millennials are not angry towards institutions the way that many Boomers were, they are just apathetic.

**Millennials live in a world of instant communication and immediate access to information. They are technologically and media savvy, with an emphasis on visual images versus verbal and written.**

Boomers grew up in an “us against them” world, where the Cold War clearly delineated one’s enemies. However, the Millennials live in a “we are in this together” world characterized by global markets and communications, where shifting alliances leaves one with no clear enemies.

With the dawning of the computer age, Boomers wanted to know what the personal computer could do for them. The Millennials, however, consider the Internet a means to connect with others, locally and globally.

Assigning authority is different now. Throughout their lives, Boomers understood authority as deriving from one’s position. Teachers, clergy, politicians, police, and parents had authority because of their position in life. For Millennials, authority is based on relationships. Authority is determined by “how I experience you.”

The torrid rate of technological and social change has also contributed to some general characteristics of the Millennial Generation. For the Millennials, truth is confirmed through personal experience. Whereas the scientific method has dominated throughout this modern age, Millennials rely on experience to determine what is real and true.

Millennials live in a world of instant communication and immediate access to information. They are technologically and media savvy, with an emphasis on visual images versus verbal and written. They are very interactive with knowledge and information and intellectually open to new information.

Entertainment is ever present for Millennials, pervasive in all aspects of their lives. They are influenced by “entertailing”, a combination of entertainment and retailing. The pervasiveness of information and entertainment has created access to excess and option overload for Millennials. We are challenged to assist them in assigning meaning to the excess of experiences available.

Millennials are service oriented, with a desire to do something for the common good. However, they seem to be disinterested in political involvement, perhaps reflecting their apathy towards institutions. Further, they are more accepting and tolerant of diversity—religious, racial, cultural, and sexual differences.

They are delaying life commitments until well into their young adult years—due to their experience of changing family structures, pervasive change, and option overload. They are looking for a world and a church that is stable.

### **Spirituality of the Millennial Generation**

According to a recent Gallup study, there is a surge in spirituality in the U.S. In 1994, 58 percent of Americans felt the need for spiritual growth. In 1998, 82 percent of Americans felt the need. Gallup has also found that one in three teens by age 16 report a significant, personal experience of God. The ministry question is

whether they have the language to express and talk about that experience and whether they have a community that shares that experience.

There are several identifiable characteristics of the Millennial spirituality. They are believers, but not necessarily belongers to a particular church. Spirituality is important, but the emphasis is on the spiritual journey, rather than on organized religion. This journey is complete with questions, doubts, and a need to grapple with faith questions with peers and with believing adults. They want to share their spiritual journey with others, but with others who are experienced as supportive, welcoming, authentic, and caring. The focus on this journey is on discipleship versus membership. They are more interested in the parish “out there,” focusing on involvement in the world, rather than in the parish “in here,” focusing on internal theological and church issues.

Young people are open to transcendence, mystery, beauty, compassion, inclusivity, and justice. They see spirituality as about withdrawal from the rat race, competition, hatred, and the violence they experience in society. However, they see religion as about judgmentalism, elitism, abstract doctrine, boring rituals, and strict boundaries and rules. Often, young people do not associate Catholicism with spirituality, and our ministry challenge is to reconstruct Catholicism for a new generation.

Millennials are drawn to the Jesus who understands their suffering. But the one who is speaking of Jesus has to be experienced as supportive and caring. Millennials are also attracted to an individual relationship with Jesus. Our ministry challenge is to connect their vertical spirituality, “me and Jesus,” with the horizontal, “me and the community.” Their experience of church is critical, if this message is to have meaning. Young people who stay connected to church are those in relationship with the pastor or other key adults, those who feel welcomed, and those who experience a sense of home. If no one talks to them, they leave.

They desire to experience the transcendence and power of God. They need spiritual experiences and a spiritual context. Young people are attracted to the experience of national and international gatherings, sponsored by the Catholic Church. But they need the local context that provides opportunities to reflect upon their experiences and to integrate their learnings into their daily life. The parish community should be this natural context.

They desire a real and personal experience of faith versus a virtual reality. The use of nature and all the arts to discover God—e.g. video, dance, music, sculpture, and art—will be necessary to heal the sacred/secular split. Their need for sensorial experiences and powerful symbols, beyond words and cognitive literacy, will have a major impact on how we minister and worship as church.

## Millennials and the Catholic Church

In the previously quoted *National Catholic Reporter* article, McBrien also provides an equivalent list of insights specifically about Catholic young people in the Millennial Generation. Following are some of his suggestions:

**Young people are open to transcendence, mystery, beauty, compassion, inclusivity, and justice. They see spirituality as about withdrawal from the rat race, competition, hatred, and the violence they experience in society.**

- They have known only one pope and could not name the one he succeeded.
- The Second Vatican Council is as much ancient history to them as the Council of Trent.
- They have no memory of the Latin Mass, nor the distinction between a low Mass and a high Mass.
- Women have always been readers and eucharistic ministers at Mass.
- Nuns have always worn ordinary clothes.
- Communion has always been distributed in the hand.
- They have no idea what a biretta is.
- They have never made the Nine First Fridays.
- They have no memory of the original debate over contraception in the church, and have no idea how anyone could be opposed to birth control.
- They have at least one Catholic relative or friend who has been divorced and remarried without church approval and they see no problem with it.
- They have never ransomed a pagan baby.
- They have never asked permission to read a book not approved by the church.

The church territory of the Millennial Generation has been further described by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, in conjunction with the Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate (CARA). Their 1996 study of young people who were somehow involved in their parish and school youth ministry programs found the following highlights.

- Young people who participate in youth ministry programs are interested in learning more about their faith, and they want to be members of a church.
- Youth ministry is not a personality-driven or single issue ministry; most young people are attracted by the overall environment and the friends they find in youth ministry programs.
- Those involved in youth programs take their Catholic identity very seriously, and exhibit a deep commitment to the church.
- Youth ministry makes a deeper impression on participants the longer they participate in the program.
- Many participants in youth programs have thought about devoting their lives in service to the Catholic Church, but lack specific encouragement from their parents.
- The family plays a key role in faith formation for participants in youth ministry programs.
- Participants in parish programs are also more committed to liturgy.

The findings also suggested that involvement in youth ministry is a very significant factor in church involvement by young people, both in their teen years and in their future.

There are some other factors in church life that have to be seriously considered. The issues of celibacy, the role of women in the church, and perceptions of priesthood and seminary life have a significant impact on decisions about vocations.

Tom Reese, SJ, editor of *America* magazine, said at the 1998 conference of the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators: "Dean Hoge at Catholic University has shown in his studies that the

vocation crisis is a myth. There are plenty of young people who are willing to serve the church as diocesan priests, but they also want to be married." As more youth experience married Catholic priests who were formerly ordained Protestant ministers, this issue becomes increasingly absurd to them.

For growing numbers of young women, the church is seen as an institution riddled with sexism that does not take their issues seriously: not only ordination, but the issues of birth control, altar girls, lay preaching, and

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inclusive language also touch their lives. The growing alienation of women from the church is extremely serious because it is women who, as mothers and teachers, play a very significant role in passing on the faith to the next generation. If women are increasingly anti-church, then to expect them to foster priestly or religious vocations is unlikely at best.

Donald Cozzens, author of *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, quotes Father Norman Rotert, former vicar general for the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo. diocese, from a 1995 luncheon address to the Catholic Press Association.

The shortage of priests is not going to be solved by gritting our teeth and praying for more vocations. Women are the ones who identify and nurture vocations, and they are not doing it anymore, and they are not going to do it, and all the preaching in the world is not going to change their minds. If you don't believe me, talk to them. I've interviewed them. They say, "A church that won't accept my daughters isn't going to get my son." "I know my son has a vocation to the priesthood but he won't accept celibacy." "I don't want my sons to go through what you and other priests have had to go through since the pedophilia issue surfaced.

There is a public perception that priesthood lacks intimacy and support, and has become an experience in

loneliness. Mothers do not want their boys to grow up lonely. Coupled with a growing perception of the seminary as either a bastion for fundamentalism, which looks anti-women, and/or a bastion for a gay subculture, mothers and fathers are less inclined to encourage vocations.

Father Norman Rotert summarized the forces alienating Catholic parents: “Paternalistic attitudes, the growing consciousness of women, the lack of appreciation for the value of celibacy, the large percentage of gay priests, the pedophilia crisis, all have impacted our vocation recruitment efforts ...”

The “vocations crisis” is not going to be solved by a change in marketing or recruitment strategies, but only by a paradigm shift.

### **Ministry challenges**

Given this description of the “territory,” there are several elements that are essential for the ministry “map” in this new millennium. However, this map is still under construction.

*Proclaim the Good News ... and proclaim it again.* Young people need to hear Jesus’ message of the reign of God, and they need to hear our faith stories and traditions. Young people can be challenged to see the world through the lens of faith and begin to differentiate between the societal dream and the Jesus dream. They, indeed, are hungry for a dream that captures their imagination. The church needs to be countercultural, renewing our emphasis on social justice and creating a noble adventure that responds to young people’s desire to serve and make a difference in the world.

*Connect young people to the life of the faith community.* Young people have a need to belong to something bigger than themselves, they have a need and a right to responsible participation in the faith community through participation in the liturgical, pastoral, and leadership ministries of the parish. They need to be connected to faith-filled adult role models and they need to use their gifts on behalf of the community. They need a place where they can ask their questions, express their doubts, and live out their convictions.

*Challenge our young people to become disciples.* Youth ministry must challenge young people to be followers of Jesus and active participants in building the reign of God. They need to enter into a relationship

with Jesus. Youth want to be committed, they want to be aligned with a community of committed believers, and they want to live out this commitment as disciples.

*Give young people the opportunity to serve.* Young people have done extraordinary things for their community through service. Not only does their idealism and almost boundless energy enable them to tackle very difficult issues, but in the process, they increase their self esteem, confidence, enduring belief in the value of service, and their compassion. They begin to develop the values of the reign of God.

*Collaborate with those institutions that can communicate value and caring.* The proverb reminds us that “It takes an entire village to raise a child.” The church must collaborate with the rest of the village: the schools, the social service agencies, and community organizations. Our ministry to, with, and for young people will be more effective, and the church will be experienced as connected to and involved in the world.

**George Gallup, in a recent report, states: “The challenge to the churches is to build up their youth programs and put young people in places where they can challenge, disagree, and build up trust.”**

George Gallup, in a recent report, states: “The challenge to the churches is to build up their youth programs and put young people in places where they can challenge, disagree, and build up trust. If the world in the next century is going to be less sexist, less racist, less polluted, and more peaceful, we can thank our young people.”

If the church in this century is going to be more inclusive, more creative in our prayer and worship, more committed to justice and service, centered on Eucharist, and guided by committed and competent ordained, religious and lay ministers, we can thank our young people. ✚

# Snapshot of the Millennial Generation

by Lori Spanbauer

Before exploring the characteristics of the Millennial Generation, it's helpful to briefly outline the developmental tasks of young adulthood as outlined by the United States Bishops in *Sons and Daughters of the Light* (United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1996). It is important to mention these developmental tasks because, while every young adult will progress through these stages, the way in which they do so may vary from generation to generation according to the characteristics and climate of that period. Thus, before I explore this emerging generation's defining characteristics, I wish to pay attention to those developmental tasks that remain relatively consistent in young adults' lives.

The U.S. bishops have grouped developmental tasks into four areas: personal identity, relationships, work, and spiritual life.

## Developing personal identity

When speaking of personal identity, we include such tasks as developing their adult personalities, developing skills for interpersonal relationships and work, and implementing values.

## Solidifying relationships

Solidifying relationships refer to such events as discovering life long friends, renegotiating relationships with their family of origin, developing intimacy, choosing a marriage partner or other vocation, and integrating sexuality into life.

## Developing a meaning of work

Young adulthood often signals a person's entrance into the workforce. This development stage includes making initial job or career choices, becoming an active citizen through volunteerism in civic, social and church arenas.

## Developing a spiritual life

*Sons and Daughters of the Light* identifies four spiritual tasks for young adults:

- Grappling with questions about the purpose of life and what it means to be a good person
- Appropriating and internalizing the gift of faith and a religious tradition
- Finding an adult faith community in which to live
- Developing an "inner life" to correspond to an "outer life"

Young adulthood is often a time of questioning the community's ways, experimenting with new lifestyles, acting over and against the community, and committing oneself to various ideologies and causes. For a time it may involve disassociating oneself from the community of faith. Some people interpret this as a loss of faith, but it is simply a different stage of faith, sometimes called *searching faith*. Questioning and experimentation are a positive part of faith growth, one that is necessary for a more inclusive and personal adult commitment.

Keeping in mind the developmental stages of all young adults, let's look at the characteristics of this emerging generation of young adults.

## Characteristics of the Millennial Generation

Who is this emerging generation? Sociologists, researchers, the media, and youth workers use a variety

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*Lori Spanbauer is a campus minister at Creighton University. This article originally appeared in the Lay Mission Handbook Series, Volume 4, Number 5, published by Catholic Network of Volunteer Service.*

of names to identify this generation: Mosaics, Millennials, Net Generation (N-Gen), Navigators, the Y Generation. For purposes of this article, I will refer to them as the Millennials or the Millennial Generation. The members of this generation were born after 1981. We do not yet know the range of years that will make up this generation. Some theorize that the years spanning each generation is growing much shorter due to the speed at which our culture and world are changing. Still, considering those people born after 1981, the Millennials add up to over 81 million young people, which is approximately 30 percent of our current population. As a group, Millennials are unlike any other generation in living memory. They are more numerous, more affluent, better educated and more ethnically diverse. Given that the oldest Millennials have just entered college, the research on their generational traits continues to be done. Can you guess what group of researchers is spending some of the most money and time researching this generation? Not sociologists, but advertising companies and large corporations. They want to know to whom to market! The results of the currently available research are pointing toward several significant trends.

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**The Millennial generation's main priority in life is to get a good education, and their core value is personal competence.**

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**Self-reliant**

According to researcher Kate Baggott in *Growing Up Digital*, "They (Millennials) begin to develop self-reliance at an early age: they can find what they want and what they need quickly, easily, and honestly." The Millennials believe that becoming successful is up to them, and they are not depending on others for help. Finding a good job is a priority. They are the young navigators. They must chart their own course and captain their own ship: "It's up to me to create my own well-being." They are independent, and emotionally and intellectually open. They strongly value individual rights: the right to be left alone, the right to privacy, the right to have and express their own views. They want to be treated fairly. Research shows that this generation has a confidence that comes from a strong sense of their ability to accomplish things that have been entrusted to them. They think and learn in interactive, nonlinear ways and are willing to explore, search and navigate.

**Love of family**

In light of all the troubles in the world in which they live, there seems to be a surprising trend toward relying more on their family as a sanctuary against the difficulties of life. They view their parents as the most important source for guidance and emotional support.

**Relationships are paramount**

Millennials rely strongly on close personal networks of friends and family. They also have a desire to be connected with others: friends, in school peers, interest groups, and online virtual communities. Lee Svete, director of career services at Colgate University in Hamilton, N.Y. reported in a study he conducted that the Millennial Generation is without the typical famous role models that many previous generations had ("National On-Campus Report," April 1, 1999). Instead the Millennials have turned to the people who are a part of their everyday lives. Svete states, "They look to their parents and educators, or a grandfather who never missed one of their football games, for example. They aren't looking for superstars." He also speaks of the importance of friends, stating, "If they need to move away, it is usually to an area where their friends have already moved."

**Educational achievement and drive**

The Millennial generation's main priority in life is to get a good education, and their core value is personal competence. This generation identifies a good education as the gateway to success. *TIME* magazine has reported that "focused ambition" is a generational hallmark and further states that "the most striking trait of Millennials is how they are driven to achieve."

**Diversity is important**

This generation values diversity unlike any before them. They have a high tolerance for differently held beliefs. They believe strongly in equal rights. Discrimination against minorities is one of the top five issues about which they are very concerned. They know they are growing up in an increasingly multicultural world. For instance, in 1976, approximately 85 percent of the U.S. young adult population was white; today that figure is about 67 percent; by 2008, it is estimated it will have dropped to 62 percent. Already, the 1997 *Nickelodeon/Yankelovich Youth Monitor*, a biannual study of kids' attitudes, found that 82 percent of children from age 9 to 17 have friends who are of a different ethnic origin. Today some of those same children are entering or have entered young adulthood.

### **Consumerism**

This generation is not going to be fooled into buying products that don't meet their needs. They are working in order to be able to purchase. Eighty percent of the teenagers in the U.S. are working 15 or more hours a week. According to one study, they make more spending-related decisions than their predecessors did, and they have more disposable income—an average of \$100 a week—than previous generations had at the same stage. This large pool of customers is only part of the reason advertisers are salivating, and a growing number of Web sites are experimenting with how to reach the Millennial Generation. One father who was interviewed for a magazine article laments, "Today's (young people) are being shaped into consumers before they've had a chance to develop their souls" (Christianity Today, February 3, 1997).

### **Mediavores**

What makes this generation different from all others before it? It is the first to grow up surrounded by digital media. It is not uncommon for them to be doing their homework, listening to a CD, watching television, and communicating on-line at the same time. They are giving new definition to "multitasking." Don Tapscott, author of *Growing Up Digital*, says that this is the first real cyber generation. He says that they are much more fragmented and much less unified than previous generations. "They've been given much more choice. Choice is like oxygen to them. They're used to customizing everything. And the feedback they get is instantaneous," says Tapscott.

### **Spiritually Hungry and Service-oriented**

Like Generation X, the Millennial Generation is spiritually hungry. They are hungry not just for answers to spiritual questions, but more importantly, for the knowledge of how to find the answers for themselves. They are seeking a practical, pragmatic, everyday faith they can grasp that will help them to make sense of the world around them.

Experience indicates that the Millennials have a very strong sense of the common good and of collective social and civic responsibility. The values of equality and social justice do not translate into support for government or other large institutions. The Millennials are even more distrustful than their parents of institutions and elites. Authority is not something decreed or announced, but something that must be earned. In a study done by Youth Update (May, 1995), young adults reported that they feel good about learning from their experiences of service, and report that they will

likely continue to be involved in service in the next five years. On the other hand, this report also stated that while service is having a positive impact on young people, they spend little time talking and writing about their experiences. Young adults seem to need to develop the ability to reflect on their experiences.

### **Hopeful**

The Millennials are growing up with hope. This is a significant change from the previous generation that is often seen as cynical. The Millennials are much more apt to be optimistic and realistic, and expect to be happy adults (adapted from *Young Life Magazine*, spring 1998).

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**They are believers, but not necessarily belongs to a particular church. Spirituality is important, but the emphasis is on the spiritual journey, rather than on organized religion.**

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### **Comparisons**

While Generation X and the Millennials have much in common, they differ in some important ways. The differences worthy of note are:

- Millennials are less cynical, skeptical, pessimistic
- Millennials are more career driven and ambitious
- A larger proportion of Millennials demonstrate a mosaic thinking style—a thinking style that is more fragmented and less linear, that allows them to be "multitaskers."

While these generations are different in some respects, there are commonalities as well.

- Spiritual hunger and service orientation
- Importance of relationships, intimacy, and community
- Familiarity and comfort with media/technology
- Consumeristic tendencies
- Diversity among them and around them

### **What does all this mean?**

Now that we've explored the characteristics of two generations of young adults, it is most important to

draw some conclusions and explore implications, particularly in terms of faith needs.

### **Diversity**

Our young people need to see leaders in our faith community who have the same background they do. More than ever, young people represent many races and ethnicities; our church leadership should do the same. We must also continue to educate young people on injustices which deny people their rights because of their color, creed, orientation or culture. Immersion experiences have proven effective in teaching college students about justice issues. Short-term immersion experiences into culturally or ethnically diverse urban areas—as well as longer trips into areas such as the Dominican Republic or El Salvador—enrich and educate

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**Young adults' spiritual hunger is good news! We must invite them into opportunities which explore their hunger and questions and affirm their desire for a deeper relationship with God.**

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students further on the reality of diversity in the world. In fact, many students that I've encountered refer to these immersion experiences as life-changing events that have been the catalyst for their commitment to social justice and life-long service.

### **Consumerism**

When young adults fill their worlds with things, they are dealing with a gap, a vacuum, a hole somewhere in their lives which is too painful to be left empty. Can we in the church find imaginative ways to help them see that Jesus' message of simplicity is rich enough to not need "things" to sustain it? Can we show them that their hungers are really not for the physical, so much as the emotional and spiritual for which faith and faith community provide genuine fulfillment?

### **Mediavores**

How do we invite young adults into our faith communities? Do we "market" to them with bright visual images? Do we make full use of technology and the Internet? Have we tapped into their experience and wisdom regarding the use of computers? Young adults do expect us to be able to attract them with the use of the media with which they are so comfortable.

### **Relationships**

Perhaps the need for relationships among young adults is the key characteristic in connecting students to their faith lives. Nothing we do in ministry can be done without developing relationships with young adults and providing opportunities for them to develop relationships and community among each other. Our ability to foster relationships with and among young people is crucial for all aspects of their faith development, from leadership training to forming small faith-sharing groups. Students who are most active in campus ministry and spiritual formation tend to be those who have developed strong relationships with their peers and with adults.

### **Spiritual hunger**

Young adults' spiritual hunger is good news! We must invite them into opportunities which explore their hunger and questions, and affirm their desire for a deeper relationship with God. There are many ways to go about this. Whether it is providing stimulating theological reflection on service and justice involvement, or teaching and encouraging the art of meditation, young adults respond. One college student recently told me that her decision to do post graduate volunteer work came as much from a desire to deepen her relationship with God as from a desire to be of service to others. Service and justice programs must incorporate provocative theological reflection if they are to be effective in meeting the needs of the spiritually hungry young adults. With regard to spirituality, young adults are also hungry for a relevant spirituality, a spirituality that helps them to understand and integrate the events of their daily lives. A spirituality that connects them to God in all areas of life seems to be helpful and desirable.

It's my hope that this exploration of the Millennial Generation has been helpful. Perhaps what could further help you is to explore how these characteristics impact your work with young adults who are considering religious life. I believe true ministry will be any work we do that assists young adults in progressing in a healthy way through the developmental tasks of young adulthood, while respecting their values and backgrounds. +

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# A new generation of Catholics

## Catholic youth in the context of other Catholic generations

by Margaret M. Howard and Mary E. Bendyna, RSM

Much has been written in recent years about Generation X or young adult Catholics. From Tom Beaudoin's impressionistic *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* to Dean Hoge, William Dinges, Mary Johnson, and Juan Gonzales's recently published sociological study, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice*, researchers have sought to describe and understand Catholics raised in the post-Baby Boom, post-Vatican II era. These and other keen observers of Catholic life have shed much light on the spiritual quest and religious practices of Catholics in their 20s and 30s.

Recent research by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University suggests that Catholics under age 20 may not be following the lead of their parents or their older siblings in forming their attitudes about the church or what they seek in their spiritual lives. Combining everyone

younger than 40 into one group and assuming they are all alike in religious beliefs and practices may be a mistake. Although the last three generations of Catholics who are of the Vatican II church share some similar traits, in some significant ways, the youngest generation today may act and think more like their grandparents or *great* grandparents. Appeals to those in their late teens to consider priesthood and religious life must be different in some important ways than appeals to those who are in their 20s and 30s.

Data for the CARA studies come in part from the CARA Catholic Poll (CCP), an annual national random sample telephone survey of self-identified Catholics in the United States. Although the CCP typically includes only adults age 18 and over, CARA expanded the poll in 2001 to include respondents age 14 and older. It is important to note that not every 18-year-old Catholic thinks alike, no more than every Baby Boomer Catholic thinks alike. Although the data used are representative of the U.S. as a whole, no one should ever use polling data as prescriptive. The data are *descriptive*. There are real, clearly discernible differences among generations of U.S. Catholics that vocation ministers should bear in mind; however, the purpose of this article is not to argue that vocation ministers become poll-driven automatons.

Sociologists usually define a generation as a society-wide group that shares common beliefs and behaviors, whose members were born within the same 20-year

### Who was polled

In order to use polling data wisely, it is also important to note the number of people polled and the margin of error, which is a measure of how closely the figures in the poll mirror those of the population as a whole. The smaller the margin of error, the more closely it resembles the population. For the CCP 2001, CARA polled a nationwide random sample of 2,100 Catholics. Of this sample, 268 participants were between the ages of 14 and 19. CARA subsequently augmented this sample with an additional sample of Catholic teens. This yielded another 65 respondents, for a total sample of 333 Catholic youth, who were interviewed in January and February 2001.

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### The margin of error

The margin of error for the entire sample of 2,165 is approximately plus or minus 2 percentage points. This means if we polled a different random sample of Catholics nationwide and asked them the same questions, 95 times out of 100, the first and second groups' frequency of answers would vary up or down by only 2 percentage points. The margin of error for the subsample of 333 young Catholics is approximately plus or minus 5 percentage points. The smaller the number of respondents in the subsample, the greater the margin of error. The sampling error for the *differences* between generations depends upon the size of each generation's subsample in the poll. Throughout the rest of this article, the difference between Catholic youth and other generations is statistically significant if it is greater than 10 percent.

time period. Some generations span a time period longer than two decades, some shorter, but they tend to share a similar outlook on life that can have profound effects on society and its various institutions, including religion.

### Pre-Vatican II Generation

CARA divides generations of Catholics by the defining event in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century church: Vatican II. The way CARA divides Catholics by generation coincides with the way sociologists divide American generations at large, except for the oldest generation. Secular sociologists distinguish among the "Lost Generation," the "G.I. Generation," and the "Silent Generation." The "Lost Generation," was born between 1883 and 1900, and World War I was the defining experience in young adulthood. Members of the "G.I. Generation," obviously referring to the World War II era, were born between 1901 and 1924. The famous "Silent Generation" came thereafter, born between 1925 and 1942. CARA combines these three generations into the "Pre-Vatican II Generation," because Catholics who were born before 1942 tend to hold similar opinions on how they see themselves as Catholics and how they view the church. Moreover, there are now too few respondents for reliable analyses if these three generations are kept separate. Members of the Pre-Vatican II Generation, ages 59 and older in 2001, came of age prior to the Second Vatican Council, and were therefore raised in a church that changed dramatically after their formative years. Nevertheless, the members of this generation tend to exhibit rela-

tively high levels of institutional loyalty, including loyalty to the institutional church. Twenty-one percent of this sample are of the Pre-Vatican II generation.

### Boomers: the Vatican II Generation

The Vatican II Generation includes the "Baby Boomers." Its members were born between 1943 and 1960 and are between the ages of 41 and 58 in 2001. This generation came of age during the time of the Second

#### *Have you ever considered becoming a priest, brother, sister or nun?*

Percentage responding "yes"

Pre-Vatican II	27%
Vatican II	24
Post-Vatican II	16
Youth	15

Vatican Council, and their formative years spanned a period of profound changes in the church and in society. In general, members of this generation are more likely than those before them to emphasize concerns of individual self-actualization over institutional commitment. The Vatican II Generation make up 30 percent of this sample.

### Xers: the Post-Vatican II Generation

The Post-Vatican II Generation, born between 1961 and 1981, includes those who are age 20 to 40 in 2001. This generation is sometimes called "Generation X" and is the first post-Vatican II Generation. These young adults do not remember the pre-Vatican II church. Their religious training occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, a time when religious education patterns and methods were very different from those used up to the 1960s. Members of this generation are relatively less likely to make long-term commitments, are more pragmatic and less ideological, and are relatively more interested in issues of identity and community than are members of generations before them. The Post-Vatican II Generation is approximately 33 percent of this sample.

### Millennials: the new generation

The new generation of Catholic youth that is the focus

of this article is comprised of those born since 1982. Members of this generation, which has been dubbed “Generation Y” or the “Millennial Generation,” are age 19 and younger in 2001. This study includes only those who are at least 14 years of age. Youth make up 16 percent of this sample.

It comes as no great shock that only a minority of Catholics of any generation have thought about entering the priesthood and religious life. About one in four in the oldest two generations (those 41 and older) report that they have ever considered it, while one in seven in the youngest two generations considered becoming a priest, brother, sister, or nun.

When asked how seriously one considered a religious vocation, only 8 percent of the Millennial Generation (those 19 and younger) have considered it “very seriously,” contrasted to the older three generations, in which at least one in five considered it “very seriously.” This may, of course, be due to the youthfulness of the respondents who probably have not considered any life choice all that seriously.

Combining the top two categories, “very seriously,” and “somewhat seriously,” we see a clear split between the generations. Sixty-four percent of both of the oldest two generations (those born in 1960 or before) thought about entering the priesthood and religious life somewhat or very seriously. Forty-six percent of the Post-Vatican II Generation (born 1961 to 1981) and 43 percent of the Millennial Generation (born since 1982) thought about it somewhat or very seriously.

This 20-point gap is not news to vocation ministers,

but what is different is the change in attitudes between Gen Xers and Millennials. According to Neil Howe and William Strauss, authors of *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, teenagers today see Gen Xers as self-centered and complaining. Millennials are following two generations that emphasized individualism and de-emphasized institutions (including religion). Millennials are rebelling against that, and in Howe and Strauss’s estimation, today’s teenagers may become the most civic-minded generation since the Pre-Vatican II Generations who

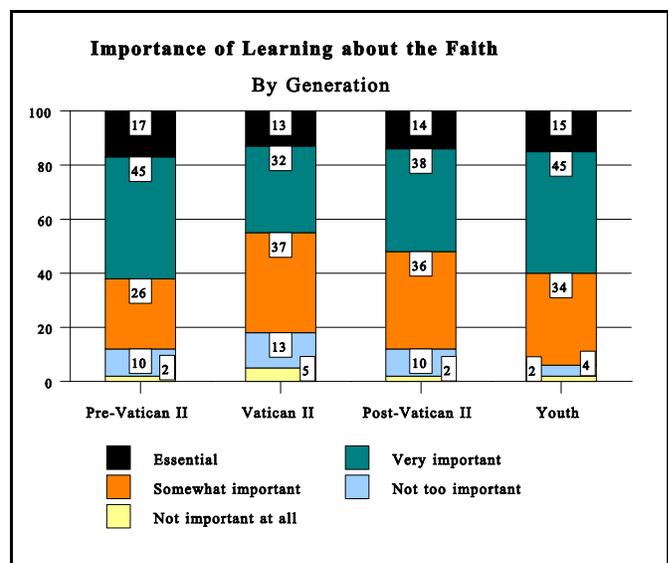
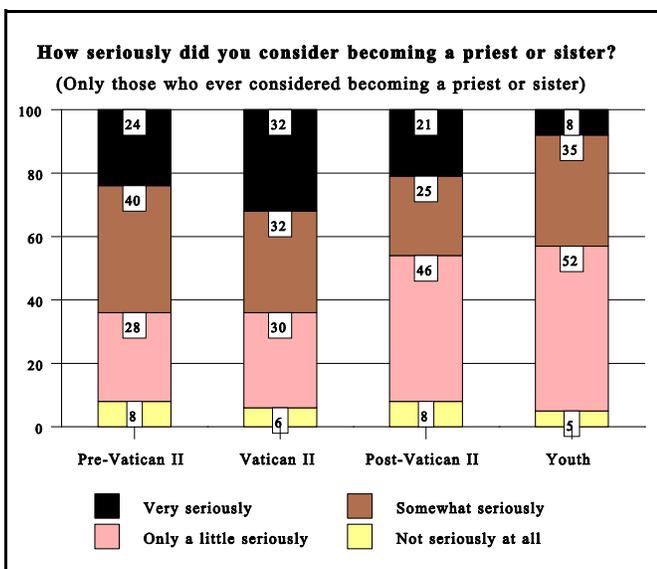
**Would you be interested in studying religion or theology at a college or university?**

Percentage responding “yes”

Pre-Vatican II	15%
Vatican II	19
Post-Vatican II	30
Youth	38

lived through the Great Depression and World War II, now celebrated for their contributions in books and on TV.

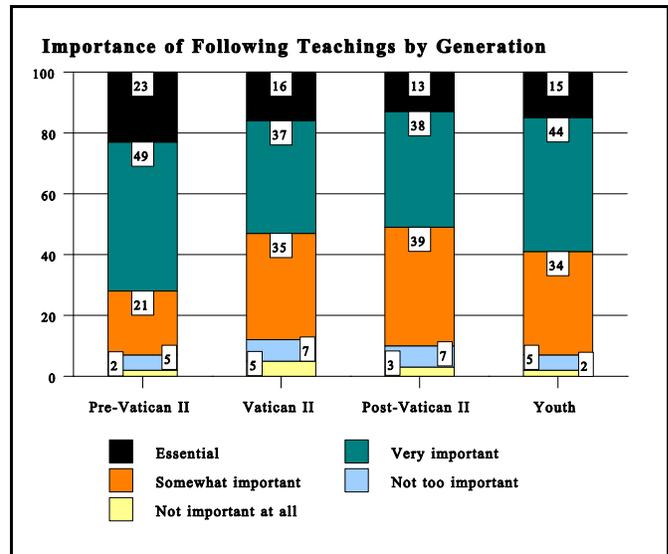
Howe and Strauss maintain that Millennials are confident, optimistic young people, who will be the best-educated generation ever. The CARA Catholic Poll 2001 reveals that Catholic Millennials are interested in learning more about the faith. Catholic youth and Pre-Vatican II Catholics are more likely than the Vatican



II and the Post-Vatican II Generations to say that learning about the Catholic faith is “essential” or “very important.” Six in ten *Pre-Vatican II* and Millennial Generation members rate learning about the faith as “essential” or “very important”; whereas four in ten Vatican II Catholics and five in ten Post-Vatican II Catholics rank learning as highly. Thus teenagers are emulating their grandparents and great grandparents in this regard; they are not taking after their parents and older siblings.

However, teenagers are more than twice as likely as their grandparents to express interest in studying religion or theology at a college or university. Of course, those in the Post-Vatican II Generation and Catholic youth either are college age or are just slightly older, and the thought of returning to school for many in the two oldest generations may not be attractive. Of college age respondents, 30 percent of Catholic young adults and 38 percent of Catholic youth say they would be interested in studying religion or theology.

Howe and Strauss write that today’s teenagers are pressured to excel, support conventional rules of society, are team players, and value individualism less than their Baby Boomer and Gen X relatives. The CARA Catholic Poll provides evidence to support the notion that Catholic youth may put less emphasis on individualism than have the previous three generations. When asked to rate the importance of following one’s conscience, 89 percent of each of the oldest three generational groups say that following one’s conscience is “very important” or “essential” to what it means to be a Catholic. Only 78 percent of Catholic



youth say so, 11 percentage points less than the older three generations.

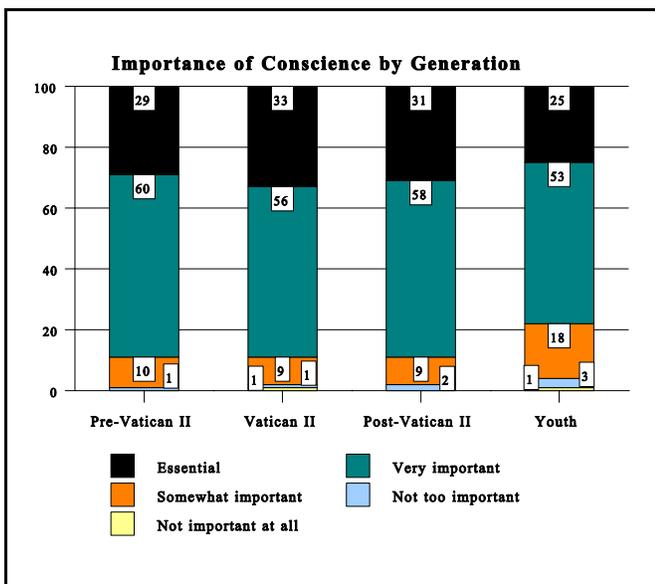
### Catholic teaching valued

The split is different when it comes to opinions about the importance of following the church’s teaching. When asked how “following Catholic teachings” fits with one’s understanding of what it means to be a Catholic, 72 percent of the *Pre-Vatican II* Generation say it is “essential” or “very important.” About 50 percent of those aged 20 to 58 (the *Vatican II* and *Post-Vatican II* Generations) rate “following Catholic teachings” as highly, while 59 percent of Catholic youth do so. The split between the oldest generation and the other three generations is statistically significant (more than 10 percentage points), whereas the differences among the other three generations are not statistically significant. In this regard, Catholic youth are more like their parents and siblings than their grandparents.

The answer to one question is not conclusive evidence of a generational trend, but consider the combination of results about the “teachings” question and the “following one’s conscience” question discussed earlier with the next three questions about Mass attendance and the Eucharist.

The chart on page 22 shows significant generational differences in Mass attendance.

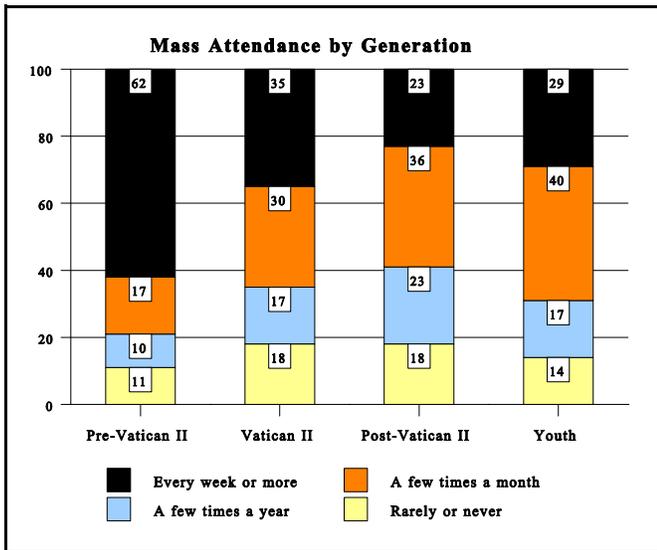
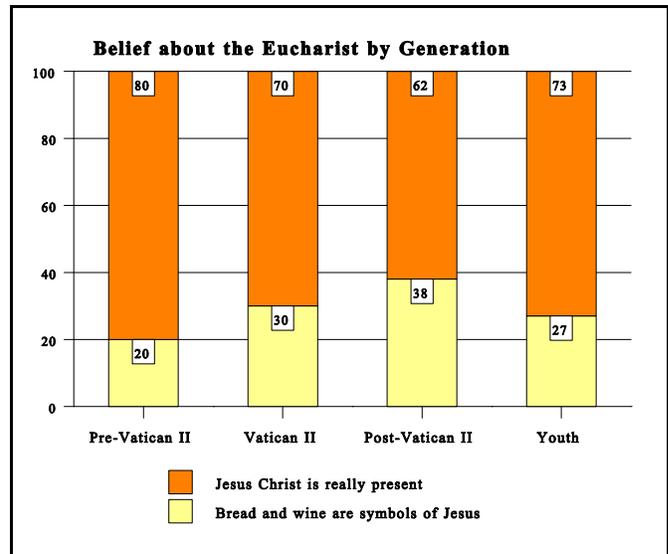
If we add the top two responses about Mass attendance, Catholic youth are significantly more likely than *Post-Vatican II* Catholics (20 to 40 years old) to go to Mass a few times a month, every week, or more



often (69 percent to 59 percent). Again, the Millennials are more like their grandparents and great grandparents, 79 percent of whom say they attend Mass at least a few times a month.

Youth are also significantly more likely than the Post-Vatican II/Gen Xers are to say “Jesus is really present” in the Eucharist, rather than, “Bread and wine are symbols of Jesus.” In this, the youth are closer to the beliefs of the Pre-Vatican II and Vatican II Generations, people who are at more than 20 years their senior.

So far, youth seem to be more Eucharist-centered than



some of their parents; but, when it comes to asking them how important the Eucharist is to their sense of being a Catholic, youth agree with the Vatican II and Post-Vatican II Generations. Six in ten of the youngest three generations say “receiving the Eucharist” is “essential” or “very important.” Eight in ten Pre-Vatican II Catholics choose these top two categories when asked about the Eucharist. In this understanding of what it means to be a Catholic, Millennials are not like their Pre-Vatican II grandparents, who see reception of the Eucharist as a more important element in defining what it means to be Catholic.

While more than three-fourths of Catholics are at least “somewhat satisfied” with the leadership of the church, the youth and the *Pre-Vatican II* Generation express the highest level of satisfaction with church leadership. Nearly half of the Pre-Vatican II and youth generations are “very satisfied” with church leadership, in contrast to only 25 percent of Post-Vatican II Generation and 31 percent of Vatican II Generation Catholics.

### Millennials resemble their grandparents

The same pattern of the oldest and the youngest thinking alike continues when Catholics rate the church’s ability to meet their spiritual needs. (See chart on page 8.) While a solid majority of members of all generations are at least “somewhat satisfied” with how the Catholic Church meets their spiritual needs, the youth and the Pre-Vatican II Generation are most likely to be at least “somewhat satisfied.” More than nine in ten Millennial Generation respondents report that they are “somewhat” or “very” satisfied with the Catholic Church’s response to their spiritual needs. By contrast, about eight in ten Vatican II Generation and Post-Vatican II Generation Catholics evaluate the church’s response positively.

In sum, Catholic Millennials are more likely to believe in the Real Presence and attend Mass than are some of their older counterparts. However, they are no more likely than those from the Vatican II and Post-Vatican II Generations to say that the Eucharist is “essential” or “very important” to their understanding of what being a Catholic means. Unlike Vatican II Generation Catholics, they are less likely to say that following one’s conscience is an “essential” or “very important” part of being a Catholic, but are more likely than those from the Vatican II Generation to say that learning about the faith is “very important” or “essential.”

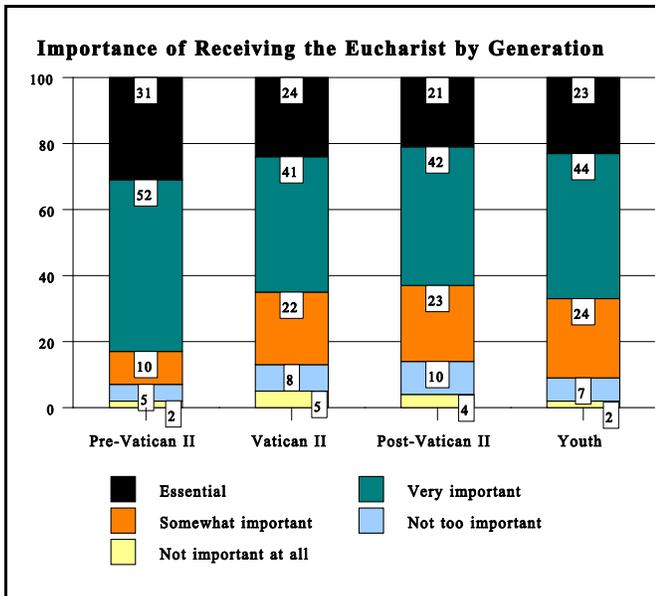
Taking these results from the CARA Catholic Poll 2001 and combining it with data from other evidence already discussed, we can see that Catholics 19 years of age and younger are not carbon copies of any of the previous generations. Teenagers now do not prize individualism as highly as Baby Boomers do, although

more Baby Boomers report having thought about becoming a priest, brother, sister, or nun than is the case with Catholic youth. While 15 percent of Catholic Millennials have considered priesthood or religious life, only 8 percent have thought seriously about such a vocation. Of the 15 percent who have considered such a vocation, more than two-thirds say they were influenced by a particular priest, brother, sister, or nun, so personal example and acquaintance continue to be profound influences on young people. Members of

est in studying theology say that their Catholic faith is “among the most important” or “the most important” part of their daily lives, in contrast to 36 percent of those who do not express this interest. They are nearly twice as likely as those who are not interested in theology to attend Mass at least once a week.

Young people interested in theology are no more likely than others to report participation in a youth group. However, they are more likely than others to say they participated “very much” or “somewhat” in such a group.

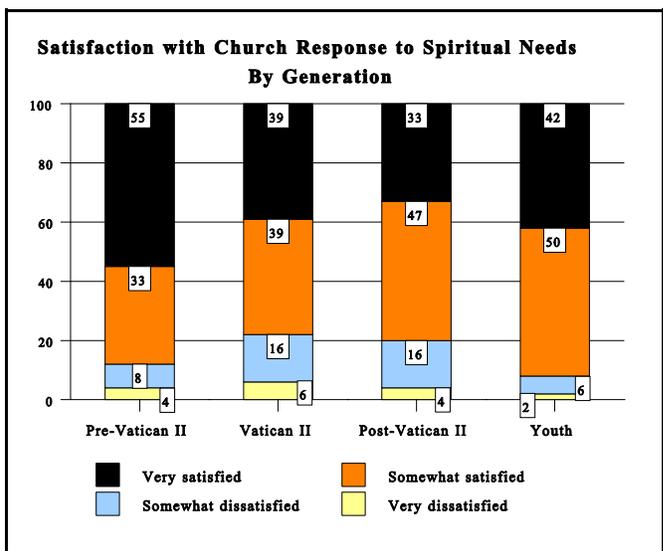
Members of the Millennial Generation who are interested in studying theology are as likely as others to report having a Bible or displaying a crucifix in their home. However, they are considerably more likely than others to report having a statue or picture of Mary on display in their home. Looked at from a slightly different perspective, 45 percent of Catholic youth who report having an image of Mary in their home expressed an interest in studying theology, in contrast to only 27 percent of young people in homes without such an image.



each of the four generations are equally willing to encourage someone to pursue a religious vocation, with at least two-thirds saying they would do so, although more Catholics from the Pre-Vatican II and Vatican II Generations have actually encouraged another person’s religious vocation than have Catholics from the Post-Vatican II Generation.

So far, all the information about what different generations of Catholics think has looked at each group as a whole. Now let us consider only young Catholics who have expressed an interest in studying religion or theology. Some 38 percent of the young Catholics CARA interviewed said they had such an interest. While the characteristics of these 126 young Catholics are important, they may or may not represent the opinions and characteristics of young Catholics nation-wide. The small sample size of respondents means that these differences should be interpreted with caution. The data may suggest differences among the groups, but they cannot be interpreted as statistically significant.

More than half of young people who express an inter-



Religious practices are also connected to some extent with an interest in studying theology. Young people with this interest are more likely than those without it to do something different in their daily lives during Lent, and slightly more likely to abstain from meat on Fridays and to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday. They are *less* likely, however, to give additional money to the needy during this season.

Young people with an interest in studying theology are more likely than their peers to have learned about

Catholicism through a variety of media. Between 50 and 60 percent of these respondents report having read a book or watched a television program or video about Catholicism or having read a Catholic newspaper or magazine in the last year. Only 29 to 40 percent of their peers report having used various Catholic media. Young people interested in theology are also more likely than their peers to report having connected to Internet sites about religion or the Catholic Church.

Whether or not a young person has attended a Catholic school seems *not* to correspond with his or her interest in studying theology. Among those who have attended Catholic schools, however, students with an interest in theology average about two more years of Catholic schooling than their peers.

While the numbers of young men and young women expressing an interest in studying theology are about equal, proportionally more young women than men (43 percent of women compared to 34 percent of men) express this interest.

While the type of area (rural versus urban) in which respondents live does not seem to correlate with their interest in theology, it does appear that proportionally more respondents from the South or West (44 percent and 45 percent, respectively) than from the Northeast (23 percent) express interest in studying theology. Race or ethnic background does not appear connected to the likelihood of a young person's expressing interest in studying theology.

The difficulty for vocation ministers in working with Catholic youth is remembering in what ways they are *unlike* their 20-to-40-year-old friends and relatives and *like* people 41 and older, or in some cases, *59 and older*. It is easy to make the mistake of stereotyping all people in their teens, 20s, and 30s as the same. They are not. The Millennial Generation is more open to a greater sense of community and less committed to individualism. Teenagers may still rebel against their parents, but they are more accepting of societal norms than their parents were. They want to learn about the church and follow church teachings. A majority believes in the Real Presence of the Eucharist and professes to go to Mass at least a few times per month.

The "graying" of the populations of priests and religious in America may actually be the proverbial blessing in disguise for vocation ministers, because, in some important ways, teenagers are more like people who are 59 and older than they are like those 20 to 58.

While those in their 60s and beyond may have difficulty understanding Generation Xers, they may be more capable of talking to Catholic youth in a mutual parlance than members of other generations. Both generations seem to value structure and order more than the middle two generations have.

Sociologists of religion Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, who have studied the decline in vocations among women, have hypothesized that religious orders that stress community and delineate religious from secular life more sharply may be more successful in attracting young Catholics. The evidence from the CARA Catholic Poll 2001 suggests that Stark and Finke may be right when it comes to Catholics under age 20, but not for Catholics between ages 20 and 40.

Teenagers today may have a mind set that may make them slightly more predisposed to accept the call, but they are no more likely than Baby Boomers or Gen Xers to have considered a religious vocation. Therein lies the challenge for vocation ministers: sowing that message on what might be fertile soil, but is as of now, dry and uncultivated. ✚

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# Discernment with and for adolescents

by Leonard Altilia, SJ

With high school students increasingly interested in the possibility of a church vocation (especially priesthood and religious life), more than ever we need useful strategies to teach the skills of discernment to this group. This statement is premised on two basic assumptions: 1) that discernment is not a naturally intuited process but is a set of learned skills, and 2) that high school students are both able and willing to learn these skills.

This essay on promoting discernment skills among adolescents is not the result of a serious study, nor of an exploration of the literature. Rather it is a distillation of my more than 30 years of experience in ministry among high-school and undergraduate students. The impetus to put my reflections into some coherent form came when NRVC invited me to present a Summer Institute workshop entitled, "Connecting and Discerning with Millennials." What follows, then, is the substance of what I shared with the participants in that workshop held in July, 2001.

I'll first review the principles of discernment, then consider briefly the prerequisites for discernment, and finally propose a pedagogy of discernment. All of this flows from the spiritual tradition of Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits and author of the Spiritual Exercises.

## Principles of discernment

### *Freedom of the individual*

The first and perhaps most important point is that proper discernment respects the freedom of the individual. Ignatius, in his instructions to those directing the Spiritual Exercises, insisted that the director must not get in the way of the Holy Spirit, nor should he or she try to steer the retreatant in a particular direction, but rather should help the retreatant to understand the

experience of prayer and what the Spirit is teaching through that experience.

In vocation discernment, the same principle applies. "Obviously," you say. Well, perhaps not so obviously. It's very easy for those accompanying someone in discernment to subtly or not so subtly allow their own desires to get in the way. This is especially true in the present circumstance when vocations are at a premium and we would all like to welcome lots of new novices into our congregations. And young novices especially! So the first principle is actually a caution to the vocation directors. Stay out of the way, and let the Spirit guide the discernor. And be prepared to celebrate with equal enthusiasm whatever conclusion the discernment leads to. If it is a genuine discernment we have to believe that the final result is God's will.

### *Reflection on experience*

The essential dynamic of discernment is reflection on our experience. All experience, whether it be the ordinary experience of our daily life or the deeply spiritual experience of prayer, is suitable matter for the discernment process. At its core discernment seeks to discover the presence of God in our experience and to follow the lead that God gives us through grace.

It is not the experience itself that is crucial, but rather the affective and spiritual movements that accompany the experience. In Ignatian terms, we are speaking about "consolation" and "desolation," those movements of our heart and spirit that lead us closer to or

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further away from God. It is precisely these affective movements that reveal to us the work of God, and our own resistance to that work.

By more clearly identifying these affective movements and being able to name them, we become more acutely aware of what motivates our choices. We can become more attuned and responsive to the action of grace and less controlled by the sinful energies of our life.

### ***Discovering the action of God in our life***

Our vocation is nothing more and nothing less than the faithful and honest living out of our relationship with God as it has developed within our life experience. Therefore, being aware of what God has done in our life experience is the most fundamental element of discernment. If we want to discover our vocation, we need to read the Gospel of our life. That is, we need to be able to trace the work of God within our experience from the first moments of our religious consciousness up to the present.

### ***Moving toward choice and action (the election)***

Genuine discernment must always move toward making a choice and carrying it out. This is precisely the point of the election as a key element of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius. Out of their experience of God's love, expressed in the mercy they encounter in response to their sinfulness (the first week) and most especially in the incarnation of God's Word (the second week), retreatants are challenged to make a commitment to dedicate their lives to the service of Christ, in whatever form that might take.

It is essential, then, in vocation discernment that the individual move toward a definite decision. Endless reflection on options in the misguided hope that somehow there will be a bolt of divine inspiration to seal the deal is generally wasted time. Every vocation director has had the experience of people whose discernment lasts for years, and continually seems to cover the same ground, as the discernor spins his/her spiritual wheels without ever moving forward. This is not discernment. It may give the individual a false sense of satisfaction about being completely open to the movements of the Spirit, but in fact it absolves the individual of any responsibility to make a choice. It becomes nothing more than spiritual self-gratification and is really a serious trap.

Real discernment leads to choice as the individual actively seeks to follow the guidance of the Spirit by responding ever more deeply to the work of God.

### ***Discernment versus decision-making***

It is important to distinguish between discernment and decision-making. The latter is an intellectual process of weighing alternatives and assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of various options. While discernment includes this, it goes well beyond it. The process of discernment is a spiritual process that is built upon and utterly dependent on a regular and well developed prayer life. The skills of decision-making can help in the discernment process, but without prayer, genuine spiritual discernment is impossible.

### ***Levels of discernment***

I am inclined to speak of various levels of discern-

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ment. Or perhaps more accurately, there are different areas of our life experience that can be the focus of discernment.

#### A) Moral/ethical choices

In this area we ask ourselves, "How will I act?" This is the on-going daily pattern of discernment that attempts to understand and purify our motives so that our behaviors and choices more faithfully embody the values of the Gospel.

#### B) Career/vocation choices

In this area we ask, "What will I do with my life?" Although I consider it misplaced, I have included "vocation" in this level because that's where popular wisdom would tend to put it. However, there is a very big difference between "career" and "vocation." Just as an example, I will cite my own case. My vocation is to be a religious priest, my career was primarily to be a high school educator and more recently a vocation director. Careers often change; vocations generally don't.

#### C) Life choices

Here we ask, "Who will I be?" This is where true vocation choice resides. Who will I be in relation to God? How will I express this relationship in my life? What will be the fundamental focus of my being, my life?

I have arranged these three areas in this order because in some sense they are sequential, or at least they are placed in order of importance and depth. To be fully capable of vocation discernment people first have to be capable of moral discernment, understanding what motivates their choices, the way they interact with others, the way they deal with the world around them. Also, vocation discernment is a much deeper process than career choice and involves the shaping of one's life well beyond the mere application of one's skills and learning.

## **Discernment and adolescents**

With these principles as our base, let us now look at the process of discernment among adolescents and young adults. I will divide this section into two parts: a) the prerequisites for discernment, and b) the pedagogy of discernment.

### ***Prerequisites for discernment***

#### **A) The capacity for reflection**

Sensitivity to one's interior experience is essential in discernment. The capacity for reflection, then, is a prerequisite. We know that the movements of God's Spirit within the human person can be very subtle. In order to identify and appreciate these movements we have to be able to quiet ourselves both exteriorly and interiorly. We need to find quiet spaces and then to calm our body, our mind and our spirit so that we can focus our attention on the things of the Spirit.

However, we live in a culture of noise; we are constantly surrounded by it. Some of it is the random noise of our industrial and post-industrial society; some of it is the deliberate "noise" of the entertainment industry and the market society, which hopes to distract us from the deeper questions of life in order to keep us focused on our desire to buy and consume. In the life of an adolescent, so little time is left without "input" of one sort or another that few have the habit of focusing their attention inward. The attention of most adolescents is drawn outward during most of their waking moments, away from their inner life. And during those moments when they might have the opportunity for introspection, the tendency is to shy away from it and to have recourse instead to music, video, computers, etc. to fill the space.

Anyone who has ever had to run a high school retreat that intended to include periods of quiet reflection will easily recall how so many students find it hard to remain quiet during those periods, to avoid idle

conversation, to settle quietly into a comfortable posture and hold it there for a while without fidgeting, to enter into an exploration of their own interior experience and derive benefit from the exercise. One of the greatest gifts we can give young people is to help them develop the skills to use quiet and solitude to their spiritual advantage. It is a skill that should never be taken for granted, nor one that comes easily, especially in this era of high-tech entertainment that is readily accessible and portable.

#### **B) The ability to name affective experience**

The next step in developing the skill of discernment is to acquire the capacity to name one's interior experience. It is important to get beyond the simplistic levels of self-awareness (It was okay/lousy; it feels good/bad; I like/don't like it) and to distinguish the various feelings that we encounter in our ordinary experience of life. We need a vocabulary that is sufficiently sophisticated to identify the subtle differences in our experience. This is important on a purely human level just for affective health and balance.

But it becomes even more important when we talk about discernment because, as we said before, the essence of discernment is the ability to distinguish between consolations (those movements of our spirit

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that lead us closer to God; e.g., love, hope, humility, joy, tenderness, affirmation, peace, etc.) and desolations (those movements of our spirit that lead us further away from God; e.g., pride, fear, lust, loneliness, despair, etc.).

It's worth noting here that not all consolations feel good. It doesn't feel good to experience guilt for one's sins, but if it opens us to the mercy and love of God, it is a consolation. It doesn't feel good to enter into the sufferings of Jesus on the cross, but if the experience helps us to appreciate the depth of God's love for us, it

is a consolation. Similarly, not all desolations feel bad. We may experience a lot of pleasure considering certain courses of action, but if that draws us more deeply into our self-centeredness and away from the love of God, then it is a desolation.

This, then, is the heart of discernment: to name our affective, our interior experience and to identify its

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**So I ask them, “Do you ever let God speak to you, or do you always do all the talking?” And of course that leads to the claim, “But I never hear God speak to me,” which gives me the opening I need to introduce them to a more developed sense of prayer.**

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source. Is it from God or is it from our own sinfulness? Once we can identify our interior experiences in terms of consolation and desolation, then we are in a position to make choices. We can decide to follow the consolations of our life because we know that God’s Spirit is at work in these movements and that they lead us in the direction that makes the best sense of our experience of God.

#### C) The habit of personal prayer

Earlier I noted that discernment is a spiritual process that depends upon a regular practice of prayer. This may seem to some to be self-evident. But there is a significant point here that requires further development.

When we speak about prayer, the common experience of the average Catholic translates that into “saying prayers.” Traditionally this meant reciting memorized prayers; but recently that has shifted to a more personalized form. And so most young people, when they speak of prayer, talk about speaking to God in their own words, telling God about their life, sharing their problems with God, speaking on behalf of people they love, and so on, all of which amounts to a one-way conversation. But prayer is dialogue; it’s supposed to be a two-way conversation. So, I ask young people if they ever allow God to get a word in edgewise in this conversation. And inevitably they ask me, “What do you mean?” So I ask them, “Do you ever let God speak to you, or do you always do all the talking?” And of course that leads to the claim, “But I never hear God speak to me,” which gives me the opening I need to introduce them to a more developed sense of

prayer. My usual response is, “Then shut up and listen!”

To pray is to encounter God in a deeply personal and intimate way that engages both God and myself in an on-going conversation. Sometimes that encounter occurs in the context of an imaginative entry into a Gospel story where I can converse directly with Jesus or Mary or Peter. Other times it will be the freeing of my spirit, by the use of mantric prayer, to engage God in a wordless encounter. Other times it will be a meditative exploration of some aspect of our faith seeking a deeper understanding by the gift of God’s wisdom. Sometimes it is simply being present to God and allowing God to be present to me. The purest form of prayer is to be found in that beautiful statement: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

It is in this encounter, this on-going conversation that we experience the movements of our spirit in which God speaks to us and which form the substance of discernment. The process is long-term. One prayer period does not provide all the answers for our life. So we need to have a regular, consistent habit of prayer to develop, deepen and sustain our relationship with God.

#### *Pedagogy of discernment*

In view of these prerequisites, it is clear that teaching young people to discern involves three primary elements.

##### A) Methods of prayer

The spiritual formation of young people has to include the development of a variety of styles of prayer. People who are directing youth in discernment should ensure that they first understand what prayer is and how they can use different methods of prayer in their spiritual development. Of particular importance is the capacity for contemplative prayer, the use of the imagination as a way of engaging Jesus in a personal and direct conversation. For young people (and not so young people) this might require the use of prayer guides and/or structured periods of guided contemplation until they can develop the skills on their own.

##### B) Journaling

This has become a very popular activity in current educational practice. Everyone journals in every class: math, physics, literature, history, etc. Those who work on the spiritual formation of youth can exploit this fact and invite the youth to extend the practice to their prayer experience, later broadening the reflection to include other areas of their experience within which they can find the hand of God at work. This journaling

helps to develop the skills needed to make effective use of silence and solitude, but it can also be a way for them to learn how to talk about their inner experience in more sophisticated terms.

For this to happen, the journaling of prayer has to get beyond a mere recounting of the experience of prayer and enter into a reflection on the affective movements that accompany the experience. Therefore, the person will have to develop a more sophisticated vocabulary to express the subtleties and nuances of those movements. Most likely this will require some coaching from a spiritual director or prayer guide.

### C) Linking experience and faith

In the process of spiritual formation of young people it is essential that faith be linked directly to their daily personal experience. Many people, young and old, perceive faith and religion as something that you take off the shelf once a week or once a year, dust off and carry around for a short time while you attend Mass,

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### **Teaching young people about discernment requires that we first provide a way of understanding their ordinary experience in the context of faith.**

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then put back on the shelf until the next time. They see no connection between that exercise and the ordinary activities of their life.

Teaching young people about discernment requires that we first provide a way of understanding their ordinary experience in the context of faith. Second we must provide a way of bringing faith to bear on their ordinary experience. The former is a matter of acknowledging, usually through prayer, that God is part of all they do and all they experience. The latter involves learning how to apply the values and principles of the Gospel to daily life. This is often a simple matter of asking the right questions so people begin to make the connections. But it is also a matter of making space in the ordinary patterns of life for prayer and spiritual reflection. It can be as mundane as saying a prayer before an activity, like a soccer game or a class, that simply recognizes that God is with us in that activity and that we can use that activity to learn more about God and to give praise. This sanctification of the ordinary is an important step in developing a sense of God in our life, which provides the context for a deeper prayer encounter with God. A deeper prayer experience conse-

quently leads to a fuller understanding of where our relationship with God leads us: discernment.

### **A final word**

The remainder of my presentation at the workshop involved materials, both computerized and print, that I have used in various discernment retreats with high school students at different levels. In these retreats I have tried to incorporate the principles and practices laid out here in a way that is appropriate to the age level. So, for example, a retreat for 16-year-old juniors would focus more on the level of moral discernment (I call it “The Art of Making Good Decisions”). A retreat for seniors, age 17 and nearing graduation, will focus more on the second and third levels of discernment, career and life choices (it’s titled “Who do I Want to Be?”).

If readers would like a copy of these materials, I’m happy to forward them by e-mail or by regular mail. Simply send me a request at [vocation@jesuits.ca](mailto:vocation@jesuits.ca). May God bless our efforts to provide guidance to young people in discernment. ✚

# Connecting with Millennials

## Effective programs for reaching out to youth

**James McVeigh, OSF**

As vocation ministers, we need to give special attention to the emerging generation—the Millennials. These young people have shown a renewed interest in religious life, having grown up in a church that has encouraged their active participation as lectors and Eucharistic ministers. The Millennials have been widely exposed to retreats, pro-life, environmental, and peace activities. Leadership programs have been sponsored to energize these young people. Their efforts have supported many different types of service, from Habitat for Humanity, to trips to Appalachia or the inner city. This age group has responded enthusiastically to TEC (Teens Encounter Christ), Life Teen Masses, Christian Awakening, Taize Prayer, Legion of Mary, and a myriad of other spiritual experiences. They choose to be visible and identified as Catholic, and they look to activities that were part of the Catholic experience, such as Marian and Eucharistic devotions. At the same time, they are highly socially conscious and concerned about how society treats people. Millennials look to ritual, sign and symbol as important ways to express their connection to the church.

It is important in working with this group that we not project our experience of church onto them, nor judge their experience, but rather assist them in discerning their place in the church. Key to working *with* the Millennials is looking for places to connect. This may mean “going outside the box.” It may mean going places and becoming involved in activities where we would not traditionally be. Where are the Millennials? That’s where we must be. Secondly, a young college student once said to me: “I’m not looking for a project or activity run by the brothers. I am looking to work side by side with the brothers.” Include me from the beginning, he was saying. Let me have a part in the planning, allow me to work as your partner. This, of

course, does not refer to all young people. Some are perfectly content to become involved in activities and programs already established. However, the attitude and approach are key. Are we really interested in learning from those looking at us or do we expect them to just conform to who we are and what we do? Certainly, religious today learned from the wisdom of those who came before them. However, religious also shaped today. The next generation is willing to learn from us but it also has something to offer. The Spirit is guiding Millennials as they look to what religious life means to them. Will we enable them, or will we say, “This is how we’ve always done it”?

Sometimes, it just takes a new way of looking at things. What has been may very well still work. How can we look at our outreach efforts from a different perspective to make them more useful, more interactive with the Millennials, more inclusive? Retreats, “Come and See” programs, service projects, charism tours, motherhouse visits have all made an impact. How can we continue to revitalize what we have? How can we expand or adapt?

### **“Come and See” programs**

Evenings of fraternity; “Come and See” days, evenings or weekends—all these provide an opportunity

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for young people to get a glimpse into the life of our communities. How can we maximize these events? Often, these events provide a wonderful experience for young people to interact with religious, but young people are still uneasy about sounding too interested or being labeled.

The invitation, the event itself, and the follow up are closely intertwined. A breakdown or turn off at any of these inter-dependent steps can be seriously damaging to the success of our “Come and See.”

### The invitation

This first step can make or break the event. The invitation comes best when it is extended by an individual religious to the young person. Whether or not young people have any interest at all, they are usually honored to be invited and appreciate that someone believed they have the qualities to be good religious. We should never be afraid to offer the invitation. Despite early resistance, an invitation can have a significant impact on a person’s openness later in life to considering religious life or inviting someone else to consider it. You can also ask others in the faith community to do the inviting. Sometimes it’s difficult to have individual religious or laity do the actual inviting, but they are willing to submit names. In this case, a simple invitation can be sent similar to the one shown here.

### The event

Most communities already have in place some one-two- or three-day “Come and See” type event. The style of these sessions is determined by the individual communities, but there are some basics that can and should be integral to gatherings of Millennials. First, make the young people feel welcome and comfortable. Avoid gathering in an austere, “churchy” type space. The warmer, more comfortable and inviting the space, the better. You want young people to unwind, relax and feel comfortable with religious. As time evolves, you can introduce them to the other spaces that we

**St. Anthony’s Friary**  
**275 Wolf Hill Rd.**  
**South Huntington, NY 11747-1394**  
**(631) 271-7415**  
**JMcVOSF@aol.com**

**You were chosen** to be invited to attend a **3 W Meeting**, also known as an **Evening of Fraternity**. Your name was submitted by one (or more) of the brothers at St. Anthony’s. You were chosen as someone whom the brothers respect. Because of this, the brothers would like to share more about their life with you. Needless to say, we are excited about the life that we have chosen and want to explain it more clearly to others. This is, in a sense, an FYI (for your information) session where we will discuss the **3W’s**: **WHO** is a brother? **WHY** does someone choose this way of life? And **WHAT** is our life like? All of this will take place within the context of an **Evening of Fraternity**. There are many ways that we share fraternity—among them conversing, praying and eating. We will have pizza and soda, a sharing of the 3W’s, an opportunity for questions, prayer and relaxed time to laugh and get to know one another better.

COME AND SEE!  
LEARN MORE ABOUT WHO WE ARE AND HOW WE LIVE!

The 3W meeting will take place in the Kolbe Retreat Center beginning at 5:15 p.m. on November 30 and will conclude at 7:30 p.m. Please join us for this gathering! Perhaps you know someone who would enjoy this evening and you’d like to bring them. Feel free to add their name to your response sheet. We look forward to sharing this evening with you.

God bless and keep smiling!  
The brothers at St. Anthony’s

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I will attend the 3W Meeting on Thursday, November 30 beginning at 5:15 in Kolbe Retreat Center.

Name(s)

Homeroom:

have. Relaxed conversations are more effective than wordy, lecture style approaches. When possible, have several religious included in the group. (What a blessing if you have younger religious in the group!) Be cautious not to have too many religious, which can overpower the individuals attending the “Come and See.” Balance the group not only in numbers, but in personality, interests, and opinions. Let them see that we are not all clones. Invite them to pray with you so that they see that the spiritual side of your life is integrated with ministry and community. It is important that they see us relate to each other in very human terms—sharing the laughs, teasing, vision and concerns of our lives. They want to know what we do be-

sides our ministry. What do we do for fun? How do we spend our time together? Apart? How do we maintain contact with our families and friends? How do we make a difference in the lives of others in the church and society? Setting a tone of welcoming and relaxed conversation will facilitate these discussions.

### **Use mini-surveys well**

This year, in an attempt to link this event to follow-up activities, we tried a new approach. As the young people arrived, were greeted, and filled out name tags, we asked them to assist the brothers by completing a simple hand-out.

**They want to know what we do besides our ministry. What do we do for fun? How do we spend our time together? Apart? ... Setting a tone of welcoming and relaxed conversation will facilitate these discussions.**

The hand-out asked four questions.

1. *When you think of the Franciscan Brothers, what are the first three words or statements that come to mind?* This question engages the students in a process of naming what they think about us. Thus, before even becoming involved in discussions, they have a chance to reflect on who the brothers are. Later they share these thoughts in the discussion. Their written responses also provide valuable input to share with the brothers about what our students think of us. Many of the statements are quite affirming and encouraging. Sometimes this opportunity can also signal red flags that we should be attentive to in terms of our public perception. Other times, it can provide a wonderful opportunity for on-going dialogue with the individual.

2. *What is it about the brothers that would cause you to consider our life or cause you to encourage someone else to consider the life of a Franciscan Brother?* This question prompts immediate reflection on our religious lifestyle. It also is a non-threatening approach of looking at a religious vocation from the viewpoint of someone else. At the same time, it raises the important question of encouraging others and opens the door to discussing one's attitudes about inviting others to consider religious life. Finally, it again surfaces valuable information for the community about why some-

one may be hesitant to invite someone to join our community. As an aside, this is always a challenging question to pursue with members of your own community as to why they may or may not invite others to join us.

3. *What is it about the life of a religious brother that might discourage you from considering or encouraging another to become a Franciscan brother?* While this question appears very negative, it provides an opportunity to dispel many of the myths which exist about the life of religious. It puts some of the difficult questions right on the table, allowing them to be addressed later in the group or individually.

4. *On the reverse side of this sheet, list any questions that you might have about the life and ministry of the Franciscan Brothers.* This provides the students with an opportunity to process some of their questions before the event even begins. It also gathers information that can be helpful to the religious community and vocation minister in the public perception of the community. After answering all four questions, the students are better prepared for the event and more focused on what they hope to learn and experience. Recognizing that in every group there are those who could be very interested but who are shy or intimidated by a group, this fourth question gives such individuals an opportunity to ask questions. Their written questions could be the beginning of dialogue with the vocation minister or one of the other brothers.

Finally, everyone is given the opportunity to list an e-mail address or phone number so that a response can be made to their questions.

This simple, one-page hand-out, completed while people are arriving and settling in for the event provides them with an opportunity to reflect and focus before the event begins.

Toward the conclusion of the event, once again we try to involve the participants by having them complete a hand-out. We ask them for input to assist us in our ministry. We ask them:

- *To suggest slogans, clever ideas for posters and advertisements*
- *To tell us what they would like to see or learn from a video about the brothers*
- *To recommend how to make a video or Web site attractive, informative and inviting*

By asking these questions, we connect with the young people, letting them know that we value their opinion.

Again, we also gain some fresh, young input that will be helpful in our future work. Furthermore, we've put the young people in the mode of thinking about what would attract someone their age to religious life.

The hand-out then continues:

*Would you be willing to serve on an Advisory Committee to the brothers to recommend ways to make more people aware of the brothers' vocation in the church?*

*Do you have any special talents or interests that could assist us in promoting the brothers' vocation?*

Artist \_\_\_\_\_ musician \_\_\_\_\_  
photographer \_\_\_\_\_ videographer \_\_\_\_\_  
Web site wizard \_\_\_\_\_ graphic designer \_\_\_\_\_

*The best way to contact me is: \_\_\_\_\_*

**What I've found helpful after visiting classes is to ask the teachers to give me the name of a number of students who they feel might be open to a religious vocation.**

### **The follow-up**

Building bridges is essential after your community's "Come and See" event. You will have young people leaving the event at all different levels of interest, from none to keen. No matter their interest, every one of the participants plays a key role in your future efforts. Whether or not they are interested, they may influence others. Find ways to keep them all in the loop, whether it be mailing lists for newsletters, invites to future events, or an occasional call or note. Depending on the level of interest, the level of contact would be more specific, such as ministry experiences, CONTACT Program, Affiliates/Associates, retreats etc. These are just some of the ways that you can follow-up. The hand-outs that you had them fill out during the event will create opportunities for you to make contact with those who are willing to assist you. This creates a non-threatening way for them to keep in touch with you and your community as an advisor, rather than being labeled or singled out. Getting to know you and working with you may nurture the beginnings of a vocation. Many Millennials are

quite comfortable telling their peers about their interest in religious life, but there are still some who may be concerned about peer pressure.

### **School visits**

In my early days as a vocation director, I made a point of visiting many classes, but soon realized that while these visits promoted awareness and hopefully planted the seeds for vocation discernment, if there was not some formal follow-up, the visits had limited success. It is most important that teachers and religious on staff continue to promote vocations and are involved in ongoing contact. What I've found helpful after visiting classes is to ask the teacher(s) to give me the name of a number of students who they feel might be open to a religious vocation. Normal peer pressure and a fear of being identified as someone who might have a religious vocation makes it difficult for the young person to ask questions or seek out the vocation director. Using a back door approach, I send for the students previously named. I tell them that I have asked them to help me by evaluating my presentation. What clicked with them? What did I say that might put young people off? I ask them to help me by evaluating the presentation. Then I ask them if they have ever considered religious life themselves and do they have any questions? Often this opens up an excellent conversation that can be the start of a discernment process. The student can return to class and honestly say that he was asked to evaluate the presentation. Meanwhile, you may set in motion a healthy discernment process.

### **Side by side**

Millennials want to see up close who we are. They want to experience what we do to better understand our lifestyle. They want to see us enjoy each other, work well together, and share in the prayer life of the church together. For the Millennials, the key word is "together." They can serve God and the church alone. As singles or as married people, they can be involved in their parishes. They can pray alone. They can have a happy life without joining a religious order. However, many of them want to make a difference as part of a larger group—religious who are bonded together with a sense of communal concern, whose prayer life together strengthens their individual spiritual journey, whose corporate witness speaks volumes to others as men and women of service who are first and foremost members of a religious order. Whether it be Eucharist, a vigil for a social justice issue, Eucharistic ado-

ration, Taize Prayer, the rosary—these are seen as ways of encountering Jesus and the Blessed Mother with others in religious life. The service/ministry is the effect of a strong religious life motivated by the Gospel and accomplished in community. Our task is to look for opportunities to engage the Millennials and our community members in experiences that will cause the Millennials to seriously consider our lifestyle. These do not have to be elaborate, costly projects. Many communities have experiences of service where they will take their young people to Appalachia,

**The students spent the week sharing community, prayer, and service to the poor. Each day provided an opportunity to minister to a different group—the hungry, the homeless, the handicapped and underprivileged children.**

or perhaps even Central America or South America to immerse them in an experience of the poor and give them an opportunity to work side by side with religious working in the missions.

Some communities may not have the resources or personnel for these extended programs, but there are still ways to provide the opportunity to young people and involve your community members as well. One approach that we used was the “Franciscan Mid-Winter Alternative,” a program that allowed our local students and brothers to participate while involving our students back home from a distance. Collaboration with other religious congregations made this co-ed project a success.

### **Franciscan Mid-Winter Alternative**

During the February break, 22 junior and senior students from Franciscan Brothers’ Secondary Schools participated in the first Mid-Winter Alternative Experience. It was sponsored by the Franciscan Brothers. The students traveled from North Carolina, Missouri, and four counties in New York. These students gave up their break to participate in an experience of community and to serve in the inner city of Brooklyn. Project Director Brother Damian Novello, OSF was assisted by myself and Richard Contino, OSF. Agnes Penny, campus minister from Cardinal Gibbons in

North Carolina, also participated. Numerous brothers assisted by cooking, serving, escorting the students to ministry sites and showing them New York City.

The students spent the week sharing community, prayer, and service to the poor. Each day provided an opportunity to minister to a different group—the hungry, the homeless, the handicapped and underprivileged children. They had time for reflecting on and discussing each experience. The students journaled and brought those they served to prayer. Many of the students came from suburban or rural areas. Sleeping on the floor in sleeping bags in classrooms, using the gym showers and bathrooms, having to cook, clean up and set up for meals was a new experience for many of them. Having to work together with different personalities was also a learning experience. But they were quick learners, and community building happened early in the week. From board games, to videos, to playing in the gym, the students enjoyed each other’s company in the evenings. Guest speakers gave input on the experience of the needy in New York. In addition to seeing their ministry sites, the young people also toured some of the poorer neighborhoods in Brooklyn. A trip to New York’s Chinatown gave them another opportunity to experience the cultural diversity of the city. Attending an Hispanic liturgy gave them an opportunity to see the diversity of liturgical experience in the church in New York. Playtime was also built into the schedule—excursions to Manhattan and a Broadway show (“Les Miserables”) rounded out the New York experience for all.

The students were broken into ministry teams so that each day they would rotate to a new experience. A special treat was devised for Washington’s Birthday as some of the sites were not open that day. When school is closed, many inner city youth are confined to small apartments during the day because it’s not safe to play outside. We picked up a group of 40 children, ages 7-12, from St. Lucy/St. Patrick Parish. The older students were the kids’ mentors and entertained them on the bus while traveling to Bishop Ford High School. Shortly after arrival we showed an animated videotape on the life of Francis of Assisi. This made the children and their mentors aware of the necessity of caring for each other. Then the whole group broke into smaller groups where the mentors did some group activities and games with the younger children. Lunch followed, with everyone charging to the gym afterward for ice cream. The noise level rose rapidly as the boys and girls engaged in a variety of activities and games. The youngsters and their mentors bonded quickly, and as

they left for their bus ride home many were very sad.

That first day of ministry was one that would be talked about all week. During the remainder of the week, the high school students assisted at various social service agencies, lending a hand at soup kitchens, a half-way house, a food and clothing pantry, and a facility for the handicapped.

Throughout the experience, brothers interacted with the young people. The brothers who lived in the friary attached to the school were most hospitable and welcoming, offering everything from furniture to kitchen utensils to assist in the project. Senior brothers joined us for meals and prayers. Brothers came from many friaries and volunteered to cook, shop, clean, prepare prayer, drive groups to their sites, join in on a tour, dinner or prayer. The entire experience was situated within a prayerful missioning from beginning to end.

**Being invited to serve on a [vocation advisory] committee will be seen as an honor and the young people should feel excited about playing a significant role in the church by giving their advice and participating in the planning of**

Brother Kevin Smith, OSF, Superior General of the Franciscan Brothers, commissioned the students as Franciscan Volunteers on the first evening and I, as vocation director, conducted a “Continuing the Mission Prayer Service” as the students evaluated the week’s activities. The final evening was topped off with a Karaoke night as the students prepared to return to their homes. The response was very positive as the young people spoke of the impact of community, prayer and service and their outreach to the poor. Many spoke of the experience as life changing. Some immediately signed up to help at a Camp for Children with AIDS while others signed up to help at a camp for children with special needs. For the brothers, the Mid-Winter Alternative was an opportunity to share their charism with youth.

### **Student vocation advisory groups**

These groups can also be another “back door entry” to those students who could potentially be discerning a

vocation. Gather a group of student advisors from youth groups or Catholic high school classes.

Ask the students to assist you with your vocation ministry. Invite them to find out more about religious life so that they can help in your work. Their task should be simple: *What do they need to do to be sure that their peers become better informed about religious life and its function in the church? What will work at that particular parish/school to raise consciousness about religious life and create a culture of vocational discernment?* These young people can serve as your “experts” in relating to Millennials. Being invited to serve on this committee will be seen as an honor and the young people should feel excited about playing a significant role in the church by giving their advice and participating in the planning of events. Invite their opinion on how you advertise, how you set up your Web site, your brochures, posters, video, retreats, etc. Ask them how to connect with other Millennials, how to appeal to this age group. As they create, they will need input on the essence of religious life. They will need to learn what are the essentials of a vowed life lived in prayer, community and ministry.

They will want to know about our day-to-day living out of community, ministry and prayer. They will want to know what we do for fun. How do we relax? What is it like to live a life of service? They will learn as they advise and have a better understanding of religious life, and who knows how the Spirit will move?

### **Look beyond your community**

We must look to the larger church and involve the church in developing a culture of vocation. Invite parents, teachers, youth workers, and young adults to participate in your work. Invite them to serve on an Advisory Committee. Whether we are talking about the Millennials themselves, their parents, teachers, coaches, grandparents—all must recognize the crucial role they play in encouraging people to ask the question: Would I make a good brother, sister, deacon, priest? Could God be calling me? Among the many options open to them, they must also explore that they may have been called to a church vocation. Since Vatican II we have been blessed with a recognition that the laity play an important role in the church. There are many ways that married and single persons can participate in the life of the church. They are fulfilling many significant roles today. This does not mean however that there is not a continued need for religious brothers and sisters, deacons and priests. The ministries are dif-

ferent, the calls are different, but all play an important role in God's plan. Therefore, we must help the laity to understand better the role of the ordained and consecrated life in the church today. We must also invite them to play a significant role in developing a culture of vocation and discernment. In many cases the laity can be instrumental in building bridges between us and the young people in our parishes and schools. Have them introduce you to the young people in youth groups, parish or school activities.

**In many cases the laity can be instrumental in building bridges between us and the young people in our parishes and schools. Have them introduce you to the young people in youth groups, parish or school activities.**

### **Charism experiences**

Many communities have organized pilgrimages and visits to motherhouses. If you are visiting your community schools, one way of involving the younger high school kids (ninth and tenth graders) is by taking them on a tour of the convent, friary, or residence for the religious. This could be accomplished during a class period, and it does not have to be done only by the vocation minister. It allows the students to see how we live and to ask questions about our life. They begin to see our human side as they see where and how we live outside our ministry. This same process could be used with youth groups and religious education classes. It may start young people thinking so that by the time they get to the upper grades, they will be better prepared to listen on a deeper level and ask more sophisticated questions as you invite them to consider contact experiences.

Perhaps you no longer have a big motherhouse or a shrine to take young people to visit. There are still other options. Perhaps a charism tour could focus on the stained glass windows in a series of the places you live or minister. Often these windows, tapestries, mosaics, etc. tell the story of your community and what is important in your charism. Use it as an exercise to share with others the basis of your charism, your founder(ress). This is another way to expose young people

to what makes us tick. This could be done in collaboration with fine arts classes or a cultural tour—another back door introduction to religious life.

Youth groups could spend a session on the music that relates to the theme of "call." Using the alphabet, you could identify individual religious or ministries for each letter celebrating the diversity of interests of a religious as well as their ministries. Let the young know that Sister, Father, Brother enjoy skiing, participate in marathons, enjoy music. Besides teaching, religious may serve as an overnight supervisor at a group home, or deliver meals on wheels. The more that we show that we have full, enjoyable, challenging lives, the more that Millennials will be open to considering our way of life. Other youth groups or religious education activities that appeal to youth are the TV show, *Real World* and music videos. These media attractions can be used to involve young people in creating video/music experiences for which they need to get accurate information about religious life in order to tape.

Journalism can be another vehicle to involve Millennials. Have them write a feature story on a religious. Art projects such as murals, mosaics, or paintings that capture what it is to be a religious involve them on a sensory level. Leadership camps and seminars provide a perfect opportunity to stress the role of a Christian leader in society. They give young people a chance to explore the many ways of serving as leaders in the church.

Vocation ministers must look for ways to insert themselves into the lives of the Millennials. We cannot sit back and wait for them to come to us. We must also invite the members of our congregations to make a preferential option for the young. Responding to our call, we generously invite all who serve God as married or single, ordained or consecrated to develop a culture of vocation. Together, we will continue to spread the Gospel as we fulfill our special mission within the church. St. Paul reminds us of the many gifts of the church. We are aware of the needs of the church. Let us be sure that Millennials look to the many options before them and that they ask the question: *Is God calling me to be a religious brother, or sister, deacon or priest?* ✚

# A successful vocations program I discovered by accident

**John Merkelis, OSA**

The first step to any high school discernment program is to identify potential candidates. All right, this part is not by accident ... but it is easy! You keep your eyes and ears open. Look for students who linger after class to talk with their theology teacher or who want to be involved in the pastoral office activities or campus ministry programs (lectors, Eucharistic ministers, service project participants, or just generally helpful students). You can also make a presentation to the faculty, including administrators and staff, as part of a brief in-service (not over an hour; teachers have attention spans, too!). During this time you can list the qualities which may indicate a call to priesthood, religious life or diaconate:

- Reverence, commitment to prayer
- Respect
- Compassion
- Involvement in church activities/service projects
- Generosity
- Sense of Humor
- Intelligence
- Responsibility
- Leadership, ability to take initiative

Direct teachers to write down the names of students who exhibit these characteristics. I usually provide a class list to assist teachers in their deliberations.

Remember to give teachers time to think about students. I play background music for meditation which sets a nice tone and may even stimulate the Spirit, who, I have assured the faculty, is guiding the process. Collect the lists, and notice the repeats, those students who are recognized by a variety of teachers. You may be surprised at how accurately teachers identify students who are interested in a career serving the church.

If you are regularly present at the high school, parents and teachers who know you are doing vocations work will identify their children or students for you. Once, while jogging laps around the track, I was interrupted by a theology teacher who informed me of one of his student's desire to be a priest. I repeated the name of the student over and over as I continued my run, as I had no pen or paper handy to remind me of this gift from God. Another teacher, accompanied by the school librarian, told me they had been conversing about a student, and both of them agreed that this young man could be an excellent religious. They asked the student if they could refer him to me, and he agreed.

## **Next step: invite them to join a group**

When you have compiled a list of prospective candidates, invite the students to join a group (promise them pizza and pop). Invite them individually or by group to consider joining you for a discussion on vocations. You may be tempted to think that this won't bring a positive response. On the contrary, there is little risk and the promise of great benefit. The students with whom I spoke felt complimented that someone (teacher, staff, administrator) recognized in them the qualities listed above. The bottom line is you are complimenting students while extending an invitation that may be accepted or rejected without embarrassment. Tell them pop and pizza will be provided, and they

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*John Merkelis, OSA is vocations director for the Augustinian Midwest Province of our Mother of Good Counsel. He has served in the high school apostolate for 11 years as counselor, teacher, pastoral director and principal.*

may even miss a class period! Sneaky, you say, fearing that every student would be wooed at the thought of such goodies? Anyone who has done high school vocation work can attest to the fact that non-serious candidates would rather attend class than talk about vocations. I proceed on the assumption that anyone who wants to participate in such a group has a genuine interest—pizza, pop, and missed class time notwithstanding. Besides, vocation is such an intimate topic, it may take pizza and pop to help someone acknowledge that the desire is in his/her heart. As the literature and studies have shown, we must invite and encourage

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**I tell them vocation is in reality our search for identity, and that choosing what God has put in our hearts will indeed lead to happiness.**

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young people to consider a religious vocation.

Here is where the accidental part applies. When I first began vocations work about three years ago, I scheduled individual appointments to interview students during the high school day. One afternoon I was short on time and decided to meet with two students at the same time. All three of us were pleasantly surprised at the synergy we discovered in our conversation. Both of the students were enthusiastic and desired to meet again. They volunteered to meet during their lunch period, a shared study hall, a physical education class, or a theology class. (After all, what better way to discuss theology than to talk about a life call?) We began to meet every third week, and we varied the class period so that the students would not miss the same class regularly.

As word got out, other students asked to be included. Some of them remembered thoughts of priesthood and religious life from grade school. The fire of these ideas had been extinguished with time, but were now curiously re-ignited (perhaps by the thought of missing a class and drinking pop while doing it). Moreover, the students of the group started to identify potential candidates for the group. I remember two group members running at me in the hallway with reckless abandon, stopping short lest they bowl me over. They were out on the previous weekend with a young man who mentioned, in passing, that he had once thought of priesthood. These two immediately in-

formed him about our group and wanted permission to invite him. I knew I had accidentally stumbled upon a dynamic way to get students involved in identifying members. From an initial meeting of three we progressed quickly to eight, and ended our first year with 14! This is our second year, and we have begun with eight members. More to come!

### **We have a group; what do we talk about?**

I like to keep our first meeting simple. I explain the process once again with everyone present, eliminating misunderstanding and assuring that we all start at the same spot. I re-tell the story of the first spontaneous (“accidental”) group meeting, and go over the qualities that faculty members recognize in them in order to be invited into the group. Next, I ask for some input. I tell them vocation is in reality our search for identity, and that choosing what God has put in our hearts will indeed lead to happiness. Participation in this group does not mean you are enrolling in a seminary or convent, but it does not exclude such consideration either. The group fosters an environment where we talk about how we can approach our future while integrating how to listen for (discern) our call. If we keep our hearts in prayerful reflection, God will guide us to the life path that will make us most complete, satisfied and whole.

Further, I simply confess that I want to hear what *they* have to say about a religious vocation. How do they see church interacting in their lives? How do they share this with friends? What is their reaction when a classmate says he or she is thinking about priesthood/religious life?

Next, I ask each member of the group to introduce him or herself to the group, and explain why he or she chose to accept the invitation to be involved. I have never been disappointed by the group’s response. All will say that they feel complimented; some will express that they are undeserving of such an honor. Many will admit that at one point in their growing up they felt a call to priesthood or religious life. Members of the group who have not thought of being a priest or religious will clearly make that known, while acknowledging that they are drawn to a field of service: teaching, social work, campus ministry, the medical field and organizations like the Peace Corps. I tell the group that the presence of students who do not feel called to priesthood or religious life adds a different perspective and a healthy dimension to the group.

During the introductions students will raise issues

which provide fertile ground to re-visit later. Some of the themes that may surface in the opening comments of the students include:

- I do not feel called to priesthood/religious life, but I feel a call to serve.
- I want to study theology and teach religion, but my parents are not supportive.
- What is this celibacy thing all about?
- I have thought of being a priest—why can't women be ordained?

At times I bring in a video on vocation-related issues (NRVC's *If You Were In Our Shoes* video, distributed by National Coalition for Church Vocations, 800-671-6228, and LifeTeen's, *The Legacy* series, are good examples), and we just have lunch and discuss what we've seen. The handbook, *Vocations Anonymous*, by Kathleen Bryant, RSC, (also distributed by NCCV) has also been a good resource for my group. I give a copy to each member, and sometimes it's been the center of our discussion. By the third group meeting the members will be bringing in the substance for discussion, but have a back-up video or presentation ready just in case!

### **Location, location, location**

The high school where I work is short on space, with no room available for a gathering place. We decided to hold our group meetings in the living room of the friary next door, located about 15 yards from the west wing on the campus of the school. I clear student absences with the dean of students, and have obtained the permission of the administration. The members of the group took to the comfortable furniture immediately, and raided the refrigerator just as quickly. They seemed to inhale can after can of Pepsi and Mountain Dew (Rule number one: buy pop on sale for \$4.99 per case, and keep plenty on hand). I admit I was initially put off by piles of "kicked off" shoes and stocking feet. The group members were simply making themselves comfortable. Comfortable adolescents speak honestly.

The group will also let you know how often they should convene. Weekly is too much, and monthly is not enough. We scheduled last year's meetings three weeks apart. This year the group reported that every other week seemed better. It's okay to "learn as you go," just like the rest of life.

### **Not every group session is deeply meaningful (gag!)**

Any residue anxiety over meeting place and agenda disappeared when one of the students began a meeting with the following observation: "I went on a college visit last weekend. There was a lot of drinking, and I could have gotten laid if I had wanted to. But I didn't." From this we went on a spree of reflections about chastity, abstinence, meaning, conduct, values, etc. Each member had an opinion and shared openly. I was blessed to have entry into their thoughts on sexuality; they are curious, confused, crude (at times) and conscientious. I was proud of their value system. We all felt the grace of the moment.

Not all meetings are this powerful. Vocation groups are subject to the same conditions as classrooms. At times the discussion resembles the emotional condition of its adolescent members—tired, dry, weary, and worn. Just when I think a group session has been a waste of time, one of the members will share an intimate and important happening which causes us all to enter that quiet zone characteristic of wisdom. We end with a prayer, and sometimes just the holding of hands is enough to reassure us that we are not alone. Even "nonproductive" sessions have value!

I admit it has been a while since I've had to think in terms of what I will do with my life. I am far removed from those moments when all of existence seemed to hinge on my choice of college. These lovely, unfinished, sincere, worrisome beings called teenagers are marvelous, rare treasures—with a hug, a smile, a high five and a tongue-in-cheek irreverent reference they are gone, and I await the next time we will gather in a group.

When nothing seems to get accomplished, I remind myself that something important always happens when meeting in a group. We are searching for our identity, and the journey is always easier when accompanied by a friend. +

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## Average figures

### Paid and/or requested copies

Average total number of copies (net press run) 2600. Average paid/requested outside county mail subscriptions stated on form 3541: 1934. Average sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales, and other non-U.S.P.S. paid distribution: 0. Average paid in-county subscriptions: 117. Average of other classes mailed through the U.S.P.S.: 214. Average total paid and or requested circulation: 2265.

### Free distribution

Free distribution by mail (samples, complimentary, and other free) average outside county as stated on form 3541: 51. Average in-county as stated on form 3541: 30. Average other classes mailed through the U.S.P.S.: 45.

Average free distribution outside the mail: 29. Average total free distribution: 155. Average total distribution: 2420. Average copies not distributed: 180. Total: 2600. Percent paid and/or requested circulation: 93%.

## Figures for single issue published nearest to filing date

### Paid and/or requested copies

Number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date (last issue): 2600. Number of paid outside county subscriptions for last issue: 1813. Number of paid in-county subscriptions: 124. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors counter sales, and other non-U.S.P.S. paid distribution for last issue: 0. Number of other classes mailed through the U.S.P.S. last issue: 220. Total paid and/or requested circulation last issue: 2157.

### Free distribution

By mail of last issue (free samples, complimentary, and other free) average outside county as stated on form 3541: 47. Last issue in-county as stated on form 3541: 20. Last issue other classes mailed through the U.S.P.S.: 49. Last issue free distribution outside the mail: 20. Last issue total free distribution: 136. Last issue total distribution: 2293. Last issue copies not distributed: 307. Total: 2600. Percent paid and/or requested circulation: 88%.