Sowing the Seeds for Ministry

Five ways to reach young Catholics
By Tim Muldoon | JULY 21, 2008

On a Tuesday Night in mid-semester most Boston College students are poring over books or sitting in front of computer screens writing papers. Yet roughly 150 students—in brown T-shirts emblazoned with the words “What would Jesus brew?”—have made their way to a cafe for a monthly series known as Agape Latte. This evening of serious yet informal theological reflection will generate further conversations in residence halls, dining areas and cyberspace. (The series resembles the successful Theology on Tap series launched by the Archdiocese of Chicago 25 years ago.)

In venues like this, outside of parish life and weekly Mass, some young adult Catholics are developing an understanding and practice of the faith. What appears to be bad news—that young adult Catholics regularly absent themselves from the pews—masks a sign of hope, at least for some. These Catholics are taking seriously their spiritual lives and are asking thoughtful questions about the church and its teachings, even though they lack the supportive Catholic subcultures of family and neighborhood that formed earlier generations in the faith. Ministry to young adult Catholics is complex today, given delayed marriage (median age 28, compared with 23 a generation ago), geographic mobility (mostly because of job and career changes) and immersion in a pluralist culture. The majority of young Catholics do not attend Mass weekly, and many feel no strong connection to the church through parish life. Some have grown up with negative or hostile images of the church.

In speaking with leaders in young adult ministry, however, I have heard expressions of great enthusiasm and hope. These leaders say that young adults come to the church with almost none of the guilt that pervaded the faith of earlier generations; instead, they come seeking community and authenticity. How can parishes nourish such young adults who can become leaven among their peers? Young adult ministers employ five elements, the five C’s: community, communication, cooperation, consultation and catechesis.

Community

Many young adult Catholics have experienced displacement and are struggling to find authentic community. Take first-generation immigrants, for example, a majority of whom are Hispanic. Currently, many dioceses are ill equipped to address their pastoral needs for lack of bilingual ministers and adequate programming. According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, 44 percent of the Catholic young adult population are Hispanic. The number includes not only recent immigrants, but second- and third-generation young adults who have assimilated to U.S. culture. Basic differences of language and culture, says Jorgé Rivera, the coordinator for Hispanic young adult ministry in the Archdiocese of Chicago, make it difficult to keep together diverse communities of Hispanic young adults, let alone form community with the larger population of young adults in the archdiocese. Nevertheless, Loyola University Chicago’s Institute of Pastoral Studies has succeeded in forming new young adult leaders. And around the country thousands of young people have attended encuentros (national gatherings of Hispanic Catholics and their leaders, sponsored by the U.S. Catholic bishops since 1972). There they have seen firsthand that they are not alone in seeking ways to negotiate faith and culture.

Other young adults have experienced displacement, often through college or professional life. They too desire a community the workplace cannot provide. One successful element of Theology on Tap that can be replicated in other programs is the way it offers young adults an opportunity to engage in the kind of conversations that do not take place in ordinary social situations. Young adulthood is a time for raising profoundly spiritual questions: about vocation, relationships and the meaning of life. A faith community offers young people a place for growth and maturation. Denise Pressley of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee describes how a recent young adult conference drew together participants from different backgrounds, including the military, who themselves constitute something of a hidden subgroup among young adults.
It is not easy to foster community among young adults, because displacement often means transience and upheaval; job or career changes, weddings and the birth of children change the dynamics within communities. And there are significant differences between the pastoral needs of 30-somethings and those of college students, though both groups can be considered young adults. One creative way to bridge these differences can be seen in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The end-of-the-summer Theology on Tap gathering of mainly late 20- and early 30-somethings was held on a college campus as a way of welcoming the late teen and early 20-something students into the young adult Catholic community.

At the root of young adults’ desire for community is, I think, a basic resistance to the many ways that our culture extols the individual. Since a need for friendship and love is a good and holy spiritual desire, one key to ministry is to help young adults cultivate authentic relationships among themselves and with others in the Catholic community. This can be a challenge, because division sometimes mars relations among Catholics. The very presence of young adults ought to remind us that Christian community is rooted in the joy the disciples experienced at encountering the risen Christ. As one young adult put it, “It’s not all the gray hair that scares us, it’s the bitterness and apathy.”

Cooperation
Sustaining relationships among young adults can be difficult especially for small communities, where the departure of one or two key people for a new job elsewhere can badly affect a faith-sharing group. To address the problem, it may be helpful to take advantage of the resources of a large community rather than rely solely on a small local one. The Archdiocese of Detroit has developed a plan for cooperation among young adult ministry and campus ministry in eight regions, each of which includes one to five vicariates. Instead of each parish or vicariate securing its own personnel and programs, each region pools its parish resources to fund staff positions in young adult and campus ministry. The result is greater order and greater likelihood that each region can grow enough young adult leaders to carry forward the ministry, even when individuals move on.

When it comes to programming, Krista Bajoka, director of campus and young adult ministry in Detroit, suggests hosting different kinds of events—liturgical, social and service—because some young adults do not yet have a connection to the church. She recommends creating young-adult-only events to bring them in and then finding ways to involve them in the life of the parish, larger church and society. The model works because the archdiocese has committed funding and organizational leadership, while at the same time it encourages local parishes to work together.

Communication
An online presence is essential: for many young adults, if something is not online it doesn’t exist. Internet communication addresses the issue of displacement: if young people are displaced, they need to know where to go to church. A parish’s Web site—its appearance and content—indicates quickly to young people whether this parish is likely to be a place where they will be nourished.

Young people use the Internet to explore spirituality. The success of such sites as beliefnet.com and BustedHalo.com (a Catholic, Paulist-sponsored site that receives 15,000 to 20,000 hits per month) shows the Web’s potential for evangelization. The Irish Jesuits operate sacredspace.ie, and the British Jesuits offer podcasts on pray-as-you-go.org. Currently, religious orders and universities host the best Catholic sites, but local parishes and dioceses can serve local young adults by providing links. And they can develop virtual communities to complement real ones through online social networking sites like Facebook.com.

The Catholic presence for young adults on the Internet is modest. Many diocesan and parish sites give good information, but use too many words and lack technological sophistication. With its vast repertoire of liturgical symbols, history, literature and art, the Catholic community can have a better presence online as a way of attracting young adults. Tapping the expertise of young adults who work in the communications media has a double benefit: it gives them a way of serving the local community, and it enhances parish outreach.

Consultation
The church must cultivate young adult leaders ready to minister to their peers—as small group prayer leaders, retreat leaders, service project coordinators, liturgical ministers and so on. The resources devoted to forming these leaders in faith (like appropriate catechesis, guided reading in theology and experiences of prayer) will yield fruit in the long run for both the local parish and the church.
The challenge is to develop a long-term plan for rotating leadership, similar to what happens in campus ministries, where the entire student body changes every four years. Dioceses, parishes and colleges/universities must establish effective relationships in order to develop such leadership. Students involved in campus ministry often bring ministerial gifts to their local parish after they graduate. At Boston College a parish-intern program sends interested undergraduates to work in various parish ministries. In the United States, only 3 percent of Catholic young adults are enrolled at Catholic colleges and universities, but even a fraction of this group could, with the right mentoring, play a vital and necessary part in successful young adult ministry.

Nowhere is the need for consultation and apprenticeship clearer than in the Latino community, where leaders could then minister to their peers. If the church is to minister to young adults whose primary language is not English and whose culture differs from that of most young adult ministers today, resources will have to be put toward the development of peer leadership. No matter the specific group, ministers and educators ought to consult with young adults themselves to gain new perspectives on what it is like to choose to be Catholic and to learn what gifts young adults can bring to the the local parish.

Catechesis

By catechesis I mean a range of activities that foster growth in the faith—from first contact with Catholic teaching to deepening understanding, properly called “mystagogy.” Young adults today have grown up during a catechetical pendulum swing. The minister’s challenge is to help them find the right balance. Pre-Vatican II catechesis emphasized rote learning of the catechism, often to the exclusion of affective learning or deepening of an authentic spiritual life. Early post-Vatican II catechesis emphasized affective learning, often to the exclusion of basic knowledge of history, traditional terminology and symbols. In more than 10 years of college teaching, I have found that as a rule I cannot expect Catholic students to know many of the basic elements of Catholic tradition. Many have never read the Bible, and few can articulate the meaning of their faith at a level comparable to what is expected of a college student in other areas.

Many new programs and publications are available to help young adults cultivate a spiritual life within the church. One of the most successful is Charis Ministries, founded in 2000 by Michael Sparough, S.J., of the Chicago Province of the Jesuits; it introduces young adults to Ignatian spirituality. An outline for their retreats—honored as models for ministry to young adults by the U.S. bishops—is being published this summer as a series titled Grace Notes. Another program, called Spirit and Truth, has chapters around the country dedicated to the practice of eucharistic adoration.

Hundreds of local, national and international Web sites are dedicated to helping young people grow in knowledge of their faith. While many are quite good, they lack basic and vital person-to-person mentoring in faith. Ministry to young adults ought to include coaching in the basics of how to be Catholic: from the use of language, to prayer, to the application of moral teaching, to reading the Bible and other religious texts. There is a vast superstructure of Catholic belief and practice to which many young adults have never been adequately introduced. As a result, many find themselves with a fragmentary or immature understanding of the faith. Mentors could show them, in a nonjudgmental way, what it means to be Catholic. And these mentors could come from the ranks of young adults themselves, if parishes and dioceses would assist them to become leaders.

Young adults typically do not occupy the pews as frequently as pastors and many other faithful would like. Yet their absence need not sever them completely from the parish. Parishes and dioceses can help young adults negotiate the complexities of their faith lives and understand the wisdom of the church’s traditions. Already, many young adults are interested in spiritual growth and seek it on their own. They respond to heartfelt invitations from Catholics who care about them. Today, church leaders are inviting young adults in, but we must do better. Our challenge is to follow the advice of St. Benedict: to listen to the young, “because the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best.” In this age of new models of parish leadership and cooperation between clergy and laity, perhaps the most exciting area of growth will be among young adults who take up leadership and mentoring roles in local communities. Jesus long ago described the scene: just a few laborers are facing a harvest that is ready and plentiful.

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