

**Communion Across Generations:
The Challenge and promise of Intergenerational Dialog**

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Introduction:

I would like to begin this evening with a little mental/emotional exercise. How many of you graduated from high school in or around 1985? Just raise your hands. How many of you graduated from high school in or around 1975? In or around 1965? 1955? When those of you who graduated in the middle 1980s were seniors in high school, what was your impression of 1959? Of the clothing/hair styles of the late 1950s? Of its music/slang? Of that era's overall "out-of-dateness"? How long ago was 1959 to you, emotionally? When those of you who graduated in the middle 1970s were seniors in high school, what was your impression of 1939 – right before the beginning of World War II? How long ago did that feel? For those of you who graduated in the middle 1960s, think about 1919 – how long ago did that feel to you when you were high school seniors? And for those of you who graduated in the middle 1950's, think of 1899. The point that I would like to make is that *the year you graduated from high school is that long ago to the class of 2011.*

Each generation is a culture – a specific way of looking at the world, a set of unquestioned assumptions, values, ways of talking, material artifacts such as dress, communications devices, etc. We can think of generational cultures as similar to ethnic cultures such as the cultures of African Americans, Latinos, or Appalachian whites. I would argue that, just as there are workshops to help Church people become more sensitive to the cultures of

various *ethnic groups* – to learn their language, to appreciate their values, to look at American society through their eyes, so must we make similar efforts to learn about generational cultures.

Where do generational cultures come from? According to Karl Mannheim, two key formative factors shape a generation's worldview:

1. One's childhood environment (to around age 18) – we get this from our parents, whether or not our parents intend to impart a particular message to us. Children are like little sponges: just by observing the adults around them, they pick up an optimistic or a pessimistic view of the future, priorities about what things are important or unimportant (money, material things/toys, family togetherness, religion...), and basic assumptions about how the world works. We don't question this childhood worldview – it becomes the basic background from which we think and act.
2. At around age 18, we become cognitively able, for the first time, to form our own opinion on the worldview we have absorbed unreflectively: we accept what seems right/true/consistent with the reality we see and we reject what seems wrong/inconsistent.

After we have formed our first adult opinions, Mannheim thought, these become the lenses through which we see the world ever afterward. We engage in what Chris Mooney describes as “motivated reasoning” – our previous opinions/emotions influence how we approach new facts. We disproportionately pay attention to information which supports our point of view and resist that which disconfirms is. Also, most people have a “social desirability bias” – we find disagreeing with all of our friends too unpleasant, so we tend to adopt the same opinions they do. As part of our bonding with them, we tell and re-tell each other stories/jokes/metaphors, which reinforce the reasons why *our way* is the correct and logical way to think/act.

As an example of how this works out in real life (for white, middle class Americans, at least – there are also generational cultures for the African American community, for working class whites, for Iranians, Chinese, etc. – we might consider someone who was born in the 1920s and grew up in the Great Depression. Such a person would absorb in childhood attitudes that money is tight, that leftovers should never be wasted, that family and community are precious resources to help out in hard times. Then suppose that person came of age during World War II: they learned yet more sacrifice for a noble cause. These formative experiences would shape that generation's life ever afterward: they would will save money and avoid going into debt, save plastic bags, give their kids the toys they themselves had never had, respect government and authority, support keeping America militarily strong, and so forth.

But what growing up experiences will their 1950s era children have? They will be fortunate enough to experience material security – but have to hide under their desks during nuclear bomb drills; their parents will expect them to respect authority – while they consult Dr. Spock's book on child care on how to foster their children's independence and initiative. When these children turn 18 in the 1960s, they will have questions which target the inconsistencies in their upbringing – inconsistencies between what their parents said and what how they acted, inconsistencies between what they learned at home and at school and how changes in the larger society were rendering these lessons outdated. All upbringings have such inconsistencies. The 1960s young adults thus began to ask questions like:

- Could working all day in the same office job for forty years really fulfill one's need for a deeper meaning and purpose to life?
- Why save money if you have never experienced need as a child, or if inflation erodes the value of both debt and savings?

- How could America claim to be such a good country when it denied civil rights to African Americans or waged war in Viet Nam?
- Why build up military strength when it could lead to a nuclear holocaust?

And so we find the 1960s – antiwar protests, hippies, gurus, LSD, and so forth

When generational shifts happen, the previous generation is often aghast. The young seem to be cavalierly discarding the very values and practices which their elders had worked so hard to defend. Even more confusingly, they often “mix and match” beliefs which their elders had assigned to opposite ideological camps, accepting some and refusing others. The elder generation has usually become so accustomed to viewing the world through one set of assumptions and values that they find it impossible to understand why the younger generation does not see things the same way.

Each generation thus has a distinct mindset or way of evaluating and approaching the world, layered on top of class, ethnic and other subcultural mindsets. While some authors divide things differently or use different terminology, most writers label the generational cohorts among white middle-class Americans as follows:

The “Greatest Generation” (born 1915-1929)

The “Silent Generation” (born 1930-1945)

The “Baby Boomers” (born 1946-1961)

Generation X (born 1962-1981)

The “Millennials” (born 1982-1995)

[insert table about here]

Millennials and Generation X: The future of the Church

Today, I want to talk specifically about the youngest generations on this table – Millennials and GenX – although many of them are not really that young any more. (Remember that the oldest GenXers will turn 50 next year!) For both of these generations, Vatican II is ancient history – as long ago as 1911 would have seemed in 1961. With their childhoods influenced by home computers, video games, and the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Feminist revolutions, Millennials and Generation X have many characteristics in common. Both groups tend to be:

- Image-oriented and non-discursive. They prefer experience to logic and linear reasoning. So they are attracted by chant, incense, old prayer forms in Catholic liturgies, and less interested in intellectual explications of the faith.
- Media-savvy: Today's average college graduates have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games.
- Desirous of community and belonging: For Gen X, this comes from a felt lack of connection in their earlier years; for Millennials, it arises from their socialization to team activities. Both groups need to feel *welcomed* in their church.
- Egalitarian and tolerant: They accept a wide variety of races and lifestyles. In fact, some observers claim that the only things they are not tolerant of is hypocrisy and intolerance!
- Post-Modern: They are reluctant to say that something is universally true – It might be “True *for me*,” but not for everyone. This includes religious teachings. They are also

- Unschooling in Catholicism – and they rarely practice it. More than 1/3 rarely or never attend Mass; another 1/3 do so only a few times a year.

Despite these similarities, however, Millennials also differ from Gen X in certain key respects.

Compared to Generation X, Millennials tend to be:

- Less critical of parents and of institutions; more team-oriented; more conventional, and less cynical.
- More sheltered by their “helicopter parents,” who stand ready to rescue them whenever they experience difficulties. Half of all Americans ages 18-29 talk to their parents *every day*.
- More confident and hopeful: At least they are so far – the Great Recession may be changing this. Millennials have been disproportionately affected by unemployment. It is not certain how many years of reduced or non-existent career prospects it will take to dissolve Millennials’ innate optimism. Even so, they may not become cynical as Generation X are stereotyped as being – they may become activist and revolutionary instead.
- Even more materialistic than Generation X, who were pretty materialistic themselves. In an annual poll conducted of college freshmen since the early 1960s, 75% of Millennials in 2005 said that it was essential or very important for them to be rich, as compared to 62% of Gen X freshmen in 1980 or 42% of Baby Boomer freshmen in 1966. *The percentage of materialistic freshmen is actually higher at Catholic colleges than it is at non-religious or at evangelical colleges.* Catholic Millennials and Gen Xers are less than

half as likely as Protestants their age to say that the Bible or religious leaders have “a great deal” of influence on how they think about money.

- Narcissistic: Recent studies claim that Millennials need constant praise and attention.
- Even less attached to organized religion: 20-25% claim no religion at all as compared to 5-7% of Silent Generation and 10-15% of Baby Boomers.

Catholicism, therefore, seems to have been especially affected by the loss of its youth.

Over 50% of Catholic Millennials say they are not religious. Christian Smith’s national study of American teens and young adults found that, of all Christian denominations in the United States, Catholic youth were the *least* likely to:

- Attend religious services once a week or more.
- Say their faith is “very” or “somewhat” important in shaping daily life.
- Say they believe in God.
- Pray once a day or more.

On the other hand, Catholic young adults were the *most* of all likely of all Christian denominations to:

- Say they *never* attend religious services.
- Say they *never* pray.
- Say that they don’t believe in God at all.

Fewer than one-third of Catholic young adults think of themselves as practicing Catholics, or say that the sacraments are essential to their faith. Two-thirds say that missing Mass on Sunday is OK. Fewer than one-fourth say they form their opinions of what is right and wrong by looking at Catholic teaching. An even more ominous finding in some surveys is that this alienation is stronger among Catholic young adult women than it among their male counterparts. *This is highly unusual.* In the past, Catholic women have always been *more* orthodox in their beliefs and *more* observant in their devotions and Mass attendance than Catholic men were. At least since the 1990s, however, this proportion has been reversed. While both genders of Millennial and GenX American Catholics are far less devout than their elders, *the women are even more alienated than the men are.* If the Church loses Millennial and GenX women, it will lose their children as well.

For the most part, however, Millennials are not -- yet -- *anti-religious*. Instead their primary attitude toward religion is a sort of benign neglect. One author calls this “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” whose main tenets tell them that religion exists to make people feel good about themselves. Millennials find some things about Catholicism attractive (Eucharistic Adoration, Gregorian chant, old-time devotions), and many feel unsure about their lack of knowledge of Catholicism -- but most are not yet interested enough to be drawn back to the Church. So it should be possible to attract them back. One of the reasons we are here tonight is to brainstorm on how to do this.

“Anti-Generations”

First, however, I would like to say a few words about what I call “anti-generational” mindsets. No generation, especially one as large as the Millennials, is one homogeneous mass.

Millennials, in fact, are the most diverse generation the U.S. has ever had. So, while some 94% of Catholic Millennials may ascribe to “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” and reject identification with the Church, a small minority has reacted to the egalitarianism, post-modernism, and tolerance of their generation *by aggressively promoting the exact opposite*:

- Instead of tolerance, they proclaim there is only one way to be a “real” Catholic
- Instead of egalitarianism, the seminarians among them say that the priesthood is a special and holier state.
- Instead of post-modernism, they proclaim that there is only one truth.

The problem, of course, is that it is primarily this 6% that is showing up in our seminaries and religious orders. This has, potentially, two extremely negative effects:

- Since the majority of Catholics – of *all* generations – are *not* becoming more conservative, having unusually conservative clergy may alienate them from the Church. This is especially true of Catholic Millennial and Gen X women.
- If the only young people who enter the priesthood or religious life are from this ultra-orthodox 6%, other young men and women who have vocations may ignore God’s call because they don’t think they would fit in – or because, as true children of their generation, the one thing they are intolerant of is the intolerance of the ultra-orthodox.

What can we do about this?

I would like to conclude this presentation by calling us all to engage in cross-generational conversations, aimed at increasing our understanding of generational cultures within the Church

and eliminating the stereotypes we have of each other. We could do this, first of all, by sharing stories.

- Older generations need to hear the stories of the Young, in order to understand what meaning and emotional resonance various Catholic practices/beliefs/artifacts have for them. When the old do this, they need always to remember that *“It doesn’t mean the same thing to them as it did to me!”* - whether “It” is the rosary, Eucharistic Adoration, the Pope, the Magisterium, abortion, being gay, or being Catholic.
 - Sometimes “It” will refer to an actually different experience. For example, my own Baby Boomer memory of grade school religion class involved a sister in full habit and the Baltimore Catechism. A Millennial or GenXer is more likely to remember lying on the floor drawing rainbows and making collages.
 - Sometimes “It” will refer to the same thing but with an entirely different emotional valence. For example, the religious habit might have unpleasant overtones of discomfort, denial of one’s sexuality, women’s subordination, or purported “superiority” to the laity to religious of the Silent Generation. To Gen X, the habit is a radical icon, indicating that you belong to something bigger than yourself; to Millennials it is “the Team Colors.” Why would you not want to wear the team colors? Are you ashamed of your team?
 - Often “It” will be packaged differently with other practices/beliefs/artifacts. For example, the youth in a parish might be attracted to Latin chant, Eucharistic Adoration – and Buddhist meditation. Or they might be against abortion and for gay marriage.

- The Younger generation (especially the ultra-orthodox 6%!) need to talk to the old, so that they understand why their elders discarded the traditional elements the young now find to be so deeply mystical, or why their elders react negatively to their proposed revival of this or that tradition.

Jim Bishop, in his recent book *The Big Sort*, complained that we are fracturing more and more into polarized populations whose members read different newspapers, watch different news networks, listen to different radio stations, live in different neighborhoods, and socialize only with those who think like they do. Chris Mooney says that this increasingly leads to motivated reasoning and a social desirability bias. As a result, more and more, we see those with different beliefs as “The Other” and not really American – or not really Catholic.

I believe that Catholic Millennials are at a crossroads, as far as their affiliation with the Church is concerned. I believe that many are deeply alienated by the polarization between warring factions who are still fighting the battles of 50+ years ago. As a result, they may either

- Give up on Catholicism altogether. In which case, only a small minority of Americans will be Catholic in coming generations, and our Church will become an encapsulated and miniscule minority, increasingly marginalized in its influence in the larger American society. I don't believe any of us want this. OR, Millennials could, through their diversity and tolerance,
- Lead us to a new unity and reconciliation that is a source of life for the Church in the future, whereby we could model for America as a whole a way to emerge from its current polarized stasis. But before they can do this, however, they need to be interested enough in the Church to actually join it. This is by no means a sure thing.

If Catholic Millennials and Gen Xers are to take this second alternative, they need the help of those of us who are older, who soon will be passing the leadership of the Church to them. What I hope we can do in the next [xx] minutes is to brainstorm on the kinds of help we might give. At a minimum, I would suggest:

- Arranging regular times/places – in each parish and religious community – where the various generations can engage in the kind of story-telling they need in order to understand each other.
- Give Gen X and Millennial Catholics positions of leadership and responsibility in our parishes and religious institutes.
- Explore and expand new ways to draw the 90% of less-observant Catholic young adults back to closer affiliation with and participation in the Church – whether that be tweets, blogs, podcasts, etc. – or some of the “old fashioned” devotions that resonate with them
- Don’t forget there is another generation coming along – they are already in our grade schools and high schools. Within a decade they, too, will be looking at the Church as adults for the first time. What will they think of what they see?