

Engaging Young Adult Catholics in D.C.

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Most young adult Catholics who attend weekly mass prefer to go Sunday evening so they can enjoy their Saturday nightlife and sleep in on Sunday morning. Those planning to attend the 6 p.m. mass at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Parish in Arlington, Virginia will need to arrive early or they will have to stand in the narthex with dozens of other young adults. While many parishes can scarcely find a young adult in their pews, on Sunday evenings St. Charles, with seating for over 400, is literally overflowing with them. Why do they come? The parish location near a metro station and within walking distance to professional apartments certainly helps. The church, built in the early 1960s and renovated more recently, is attractive enough. More importantly for young adults, the music, led by a fifteen-member young adult choir, is upbeat and the regular homilist—a priest from Cameroon—is really funny. Most important of all, however, is the large number of young adults who attend. As one twenty-six year-old man explained, “I’d rather stand with people who look like me than sit with people who don’t.” Without a critical mass of young adults already, it is very difficult for any parish to attract young adults. This is why young adult ministry at the diocesan level is critical to engaging young adult Catholics.

For those looking for a vibrant young adult Catholic culture, the Washington, D.C. region is the place to be. Between the Archdiocese of Washington and the Diocese of Arlington there is a young adult event every day of the week. With happy hours and softball games, praise and worship services with Eucharistic adoration, and visits to nursing homes and pro-life marches at the Capital Building, these dioceses try to offer something that will appeal to all 18-39 year-old Catholics. Some of these events are diocesan and some are parish-based but promoted by the dioceses. Through spiritual, social, and service activities, the goal of diocesan young adult ministry is to help young adults

connect with God and with each other. The hope is that they will eventually settle in with a parish-based young adult group to their liking (regardless of where they live). Diocesan ministry, in other words, works to support the parish as the primary basis through which Catholics connect with the Church. In practice, even when young adults settle into a parish —few actually become members —they often continue to attend events at other parishes and enjoy the energy of the large, diocesan gatherings. There's a great deal of fluidity as young adults go to whatever appeals to them. In this essay I describe what I found to be appealing to young adults from interviews with thirty young adults and observation of twenty-four events at the diocesan and parish levels.

Social Life

“It's important to have social events where you meet people that are already in the church so when you go to the church it's not as intimidating.” –27 year-old woman

Washington, D.C. is a place for meeting and greeting. As I was told repeatedly in interviews with young adult Catholics, “Everyone in DC is trying to network.” The young adult population in DC is highly transient with a constant flow of new arrivals looking for friends. DC has lots of ambitious college graduates who want to connect with other Catholics in their free time because being Catholic is important to them. They want to socialize with young adults who “share their values” and are potential marriage partners who will be happy to raise the kids as Catholics. The dioceses and parishes offer frequent social events to make this possible. The most successful of these by far is Theology on Tap, first held in 1981 in a Chicago parish. While most meetings are now held in bars, the format has changed little since its beginning: a speaker is brought in to talk about a spiritual theme couched in a hip frame such as “Sex and the City: The Truth About Men, Women and What God Really Intended” in New York City, and “Who's Your Daddy? Meeting My Real Father” in Denver. Theology on Tap is held in over 150 dioceses in 44 states because it works as an evangelistic tool for drawing in Catholics who have been absent or dormant—potential “re-verts” as they're

called—and new converts. The talks are meant to be relevant to the 20- and 30-something crowd seeking to learn a little more about their faith or get a boost of inspiration to be more involved in the church in their comfort zone: a noisy bar room. The atmosphere is relaxed and fun, the speakers and topics are attractive and appealing, and the beer flows. Like a first date, Theology on Tap gives young adults an easy way to test the waters before making a commitment.

In the Washington, D.C. region, I was told that the Diocese of Arlington has the better Theology on Tap events. Better, that is, in terms of how many people attend. Arlington's "ToT" is scheduled in six-packs, that is, a six-week speaker series runs every season. In 2010, six-packs have focused on Catholic diversity and inspiring Catholic athletes. They are held on Monday evenings at an Irish pub in Alexandria, Virginia. Young adults come straight from their professional careers to grab a seat and a beer before the pub is packed with over two hundred attendees. As the speaker launches into a 45-minute talk the crowd is attentive and engages in a lively Q & A after the talk. Many stay long after the event ends, enjoying the socializing. Theology on Tap is such a low-key religious event that many young adults feel comfortable bringing their Church-adverse friends. The Diocese of Arlington hopes that Theology on Tap will be a gateway pointing young adults toward a parish home. This invitation is made explicitly at the end of each Theology on Tap when the Coordinator of Young Adult Ministry announces: "There's no such thing as an unforgivable sin, so if you know someone suffering from the pain of abortion we want them to come back to the Church." It's not clear what the process of coming back to the Church looks like but connecting with a parish young adult ministry is the most common route. Many parish groups send representatives to every Theology on Tap to host a table for anyone in the parish boundaries—or outside—to join. Once you find a parish group you like, you can take the relationship to the next level by attending a parish social event such as a "holy happy hour."

Parish young adult social events are chances for newcomers to make a first connection with the parish and for group regulars to reconnect. Because of the smaller scale, attending a parish-based social event is a bit riskier than a diocesan

event. What if only a few people show up and you don't "connect" with any of them? Their social time is precious and young adults don't want to go to an event that's going to be a bust socially speaking. Sue, a twenty-seven year-old who lives in Arlington, avoids wasting a Thursday night happy hour by checking Facebook ahead of time. Socializing at young adult events has been greatly aided by the adoption of Facebook by the dioceses and almost all parish groups but a few outliers. Through Facebook you can see how many people are planning to attend an event before it happens and, equally important, who will be attending. A few young adults admitted to me they scan the r.s.v.p.s looking for attractive attendees before they go. Not all young adults are single or looking, but many are and several wished the diocese would do more to help them find a Catholic spouse. For single young adults, St. Thomas Apostle Church in DC has created a fun way to survive Valentine's Day creatively renamed Singles Awareness Day or S.A.D. To celebrate S.A.D., the young adult group organizes a pub crawl fundraiser which has also served to attract a few pub patrons to check out the parish.

Happy Hours and pub crawls are not the only social activities parishes offer young adults. There are dinners out, movie nights, and tubing trips as well as lots of holiday parties. Alcohol serves as the social lubricant at most of the young adult social events, but parishes make a concerted effort to balance the number of social activities with alcohol and those without. Many young adult groups try to incorporate some kind of a spiritual element into social events even if it's just a quick prayer before the meal or creating an environment that encourages Catholic values. Even sports leagues, such as Arlington's new Catholic sports club, have a spiritual dimension as they offer young adults an opportunity "to share their passion for sports in an environment that respects Christian precepts and gives Glory to God."¹

¹ Diocese of Arlington, "Catholic Sports Club," <http://www.arlingtondiocese.org/yam/catholicsportsclub.php>.

Spiritual Life

“The most important thing the Church has to offer young adults is Christ. We have Christ, we have the Eucharist and we have adoration.” –28 year-old Catholic woman.

Though not as popular as social events, the spiritual events organized by the Diocese of Arlington and the Archdiocese of Washington draw a steady stream of young adults seeking to deepen their relationship with God or their understanding of Church teachings. In 2003 a group of young adults seeking more quiet prayer started Christ in the City in DC. Still continuing and now adopted in Houston, New Orleans and Anchorage, Christ in the City is a combination of traditional devotions and contemporary praise music. Once a month on a weeknight, 60-90 young adults gather after work at St. Patrick’s Catholic Church for the Rosary, followed by Eucharistic adoration, scripture reflection, traditional Latin hymns, and the opportunity for private confessions. Interspersed among these traditional devotions, attendees sing evangelical Christian praise songs such as “How Great is Our God” and “Here I am to Worship.” Afterwards, all are invited to gather at a local bar or restaurant for socializing.

For the last few years the Diocese of Arlington has offered a different format for Eucharistic adoration and praise music called Catholic Underground. The New York Franciscan Friars of the Renewal created Catholic Underground in 2006 and the Arlington Director of Vocations brought it to the Diocese in 2009 as a quarterly event. Catholic Underground begins with Vespers followed by praise singing and closes with solemn Benediction sung in Latin. After the holy hour, Catholic artists, often musicians, perform while nonalcoholic refreshments are served. The evening ends with Compline and a hymn to Mary. Catholic Underground is co-sponsored with the Vocations Office, which brings many young priests and seminarians dressed in traditional cassocks to the event. Their hope is that in the quiet space of the holy hour some young adults will hear God calling them to the consecrated life. In its first year in Arlington, Catholic Underground

drew four hundred participants each quarter but attendance declined to 150 in 2010, so the Diocese began to offer a new format for Eucharistic adoration in 2011 called simply “Holy Hour.”

While the dioceses offer large devotional events monthly or quarterly, parishes provide young adults more frequent and small-scale opportunities for spiritual growth. The most widely-attended is the weekly parish mass. When young adults move to the area, they often try out masses at several parishes before settling down and even then may attend different parishes depending on where they are on Sunday evening. Few are concerned with parish boundaries or becoming registered parishioners. As noted in the beginning, young adults want to attend Sunday mass with other young adults in the late afternoon or evening, but these are not the only factors. In interviews several young adults told me they look first and foremost for a parish with “faithful priests” and “orthodox preaching.” These are common phrases in conservative Catholic circles. St. Mary’s in DC’s Chinatown holds a 7:30 pm mass with confession just before, which is popular with those seeking above all fidelity to the Magisterium.

Most young adult Catholics in the DC area are looking for a mass with good preaching, good music and lots of young adults. In general, good preaching is dynamic, inspiring, a little challenging, and, most importantly, free of any judgmentalism. There is also a strong distaste for political sermons, though what counts as political varies widely from condemning pro-choice politicians to outreach to the poor. Judgment from the pulpit is taboo. For example, when one woman checked out a parish for the first time, the priest chastised those in the back, including herself, for being less involved in the mass. She was mortified and never returned. Sharing the sentiments of everyone I interviewed, a thirty-nine year-old woman explained: “I don’t come for the sermon but a sermon could cause me to leave.” Like many young adults she enjoys good preaching but as a life-long Catholic she does not expect it. When parish shopping, she looks for really good music—meaning trained musicians—and a welcome, friendly vibe. A welcome vibe doesn’t mean any strangers actually talk to her before or after mass, but they do make eye contact, which doesn’t happen at every parish. Beyond

music, preaching and friendliness, the young adults I interviewed go to mass because they want to spend time with God and experience some peace in their hectic lives. As a twenty-seven year-old male explained, “Mass is the reality check. It is the press-pause and look at where you are at and reflect.”

Conclusion

There are many elements in the young adult ministry of the DC region that can be easily replicated elsewhere. Every parish and diocese wanting to engage young adults needs an attractive website and an up-to-date Facebook page. They must offer lots of opportunities for socializing and spaces for spiritual reflection, as well as opportunities for service that lie beyond the scope of this essay. Some have argued that the Church will only be able to retain and attract young adults when it is unapologetically and fervently orthodox. Indeed, faithfulness to the Magisterium is important to many of the young adults I met in the DC region. They describe themselves as “faithful” Catholics and are described by others as “hard core” Catholics. In addition to the Church’s teaching, they love the traditional devotions of adoration, the rosary and mass. They are confident Catholics who share their faith readily and speak out when they perceive their parish or diocese wavering in fidelity. It would be a mistake, however, for parishes or dioceses to tailor their young adult ministry solely to the fervently orthodox. Surveys have shown that most young adult Catholics in the United States do not fall into this category.² In the DC region the majority of engaged young adults are more interested in social connections with other young Catholics than in encountering the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist or studying Theology of the Body. These community-oriented Catholics have a harder time articulating their Catholic faith than the fervently orthodox, but this does not mean their commitment to the Church is shallow; far from it—many devote much of their free time to support young adult ministry at the parish and

² See for example Dean R. Hoge, William D. Dinges, Mary Johnson, S.N.D. de N., and Juan L. Gonzales’s, Jr., *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

diocesan levels. Because young adult Catholics have diverse needs and interests, parishes and dioceses are wise to offer them a variety of ways to connect with the Church.

While much can be learned from studying the successful young adult ministry in the dioceses of Arlington and Washington, D.C., the large numbers of engaged young adults are not easily replicated elsewhere. When parishes lack sufficient numbers to attract more young adults, diocesan support for young adult ministry is crucial to engaging young adults in their faith. But even parishes with too few young adults to hold events can create a young adult community by clustering with other parishes to sponsor events. The cluster or pairing model has worked well for suburban parishes in the DC region and holds great promise for other regions of the country.