



## Innovations with Young Adults

# The Latter Factor

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**T**hey populate student lounges and coffeehouses across the nation. They are smart, technologically savvy, socially engaged, politically active. They move between discussions about TV, global economics, philosophy, and the relative merits of MP3 players. They have been trained in scientific method, know about shaping a portfolio and building good credit, understand the dynamics of population growth and ecology, have dealt with parents' divorce, spend time volunteering, and keep in shape. They are fascinated with spirituality. They ask the big questions. They see wealth, but want to know about happiness. They swim in a world of sex, but want to know about relationships. They have all the world's knowledge literally at their fingertips, but want wisdom. They text, email, video chat, and call each other; they visit each other's Facebook pages; they have vast virtual communities; but they still crave real communities. *Why don't they join our congregations? Why don't they see us as communities that have something for them?*

I want to propose that we consider what I'll call "the latte factor," and point to one example that has taken root on the campus where I'm privileged to interact with young people that often fit the description above. The latte factor, in short, is about marketing. Within the last ten or fifteen years, clever marketers have somehow been able to take the humble coffee bean—a staple of truck stops, diners, and breakfast joints for decades of American history—and transform it into a multi-billion dollar phenomenon that touches every soccer mom, erstwhile poet, and corporate CEO. Starbucks, Caribou, Peet's, Dunkin' Donuts, and thousands of local coffeehouses have built a "latte culture" replete with easy chairs, board games, German philosophy, and term papers on laptops. People shape their quotidian lives around latte culture: for some, it is the stop at a favorite place after a healthy power walk; for others, it is the cup to go on the way to class. The marketers have sold us the lifestyle, based on little more than the taste of a beverage.

What drives this phenomenon, and what clues does it offer us who think about how to invite young people into our congregations? I believe that one significant driver is that latte culture is oriented around conversation—more specifically, around the kind of laid-back, easygoing conversation between friends that allows for both self-discovery and relationship. Consider, for example, the iconic TV show *Friends*, which greatly influenced young adult culture in the 1990's and early 2000's. The title characters came together at a coffeehouse, where they exchanged stories of their work and love lives and built themselves into a kind of family. Theirs were deeply intentional relationships, contrasted (often in very funny ways) with their respective family-of-origin relationships. Their stories resonated (and still resonate) with many young people who have experienced geographic and economic mobility, either through college or work, and who seek places—to use a line from an even earlier iconic TV show, *Cheers*—"where everybody knows your name."

Conversation ("turning together") is about moving beyond image to reality. The latte culture is about creating a space within which people might move out of the flow of busyness that characterizes postmodern life, to relax and enjoy. It is scarcely about the beverage and more about the lifestyle; a similar point might be observed about advertising for alcoholic beverages, cars, soft drinks, underwear, and any number of objects for consumption. Latte culture invites people to conversation, persuades them that lattes enable a kind of focusing of conversation. The average cup of orange juice out of the fridge in the morning says "on my way to work/school!", but the latte says "let's linger and talk about life. There's more than the rat race to think about."

In 2006 Boston College's Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Center, of which I was then Director, initiated a program we called "Agape Latte." The first word, of course, refers to the New Testament Greek word for "love," predicated of God in the first letter of John. Our hope was to create a forum that capitalized on latte culture, but invited young people

to engage religious, theological, spiritual, and ethical questions. The program was spearheaded by Dawn Overstreet, now of Loyola University in Chicago, who researched the very successful Theology on Tap program that the Archdiocese of Chicago initiated over twenty five years ago, and which has spread around the country. That model was relatively simple: bring talented speakers to talk with young people about interesting Church-related themes, in a relaxed venue where they could eat, drink, and meet one another. Agape Latte began by drawing heavily from this model. We established it at an on-campus coffeehouse, provided free lattes and desserts, and brought many of our most talented professors and administrators to talk in a non-academic, personal, engaging way.

What was important then and is still important now is advertising. The latte factor is all about selling a way of being in the world, and it takes imagination to spread the word. A simple announcement at the Sunday masses on campus would not work, nor would a listing in the student activities calendar. What was critical for the launch—which filled the room of about 150 people—was a multifaceted approach. First, there was the recruitment of talented students to help get the word out. Second, there was the development of the name and slogan (“What Would Jesus Brew?”). Next, there was graphic design, with the helpful work of Louis Eppich (Boston College class of 2008), incorporate the picture of a coffee cup with the slogan was easy to recognize on the many flyers that volunteers posted all over campus. Finally, we printed T-shirts that our volunteers wore the day of the first event, and we gave them away to the first 100 visitors. The “buzz” around campus was very positive, and it was a huge success. Since then, we’ve held Agape Latte monthly, and almost always bring a full house. Students have told me that there are residual benefits, too—conversations that begin in the coffeehouse spill back into the residence halls, sometimes engaging roommates or others who aren’t quite so interested in religious topics.

Agape Latte and other initiatives serve to provide young people with “entry points” into a religious culture which, for the most part, they do not understand. With the fracture of religious communities in the last several decades, young people have not, as a rule, experienced the kind of formation in faith that their parents and grandparents experienced. And so they are religious scavengers, often fascinated by the bits they come upon, but lacking a “big picture” with which to make sense of their own choices in matters of spirituality.

Advertisers know that they sell image; they also know that the images they sell often are disconnected

from reality. There is nothing wrong with selling image in itself; congregations would do well to probe the question of what image they put forth to young people today. Is the image one of old people clinging to a backwards doctrine which modern science flatly contradicts? Or of political conservatives/liberals out of touch with the wider world? Or of judgmental people whose moral stances seem to lack compassion? Young people today have many images of what religion does to people; all too frequently these images are caricatures. What Agape Latte has shown me is that marketing spirituality is not in itself a bad thing; it is bad only if the marketing is a lie. Jesus, Saint Paul, and the prophets understood that proclaiming the word of God meant finding creative ways to get the message out, to pluck people out of their drowsiness to pay attention. “Thus says the Lord!” was the language of the prophets; today’s language must be appropriate for digital media. (In the case of Agape Latte, students can download the talks if they happen to miss one.)

The related challenge is to guide young people through these entry points into fuller participation in the life of the worshipping community. It is too early to know how effective we are at doing this; but there are indicators that as a whole the University is finding ways to encourage spiritual growth and community worship. One ingredient is personal invitation from peers; another is effective liturgy that provides an authentic worship experience, for it too is different from the flow of ordinary life. A third ingredient is a road map; we offer students several, including the “prayer map” of places on campus where people pray, and the so-called “Red Book” that introduces students to prayer in the Ignatian tradition. My sense is that the cluster of these different factors, not unlike different advertising strategies, help students to develop a certain sense of what the Jesuits call “our way of proceeding.” Like advertisers selling latte culture, we too are trying to cultivate an imagination of a way of being in the world. The difference, in my view, is that the way of being in the world to which we are inviting young people is, in the end, much more satisfying.

#### Works Cited

Muldoon, Tim. *Seeds of Hope: Young Adults and the Catholic Church in the US*. New York: Paulist Press, 2008.

#### Web Sites

##### Agape Latte:

[www.bc.edu/church21/studentcorner/agapelatte.html](http://www.bc.edu/church21/studentcorner/agapelatte.html)

##### Boston College Prayer Map:

[www.bc.edu/sites/prayermap](http://www.bc.edu/sites/prayermap)

##### The Boston College “Red Book”

[www.bc.edu/offices/mission/publications.html](http://www.bc.edu/offices/mission/publications.html)