An attempt to answer the question: Where are the young adults?

Fr. Peter Daly | Jan. 12, 2015 Parish Diary

Everywhere from Boston to Minneapolis, Catholic churches have closed or been consolidated into regional clusters. The chief reason is declining Mass attendance.

In New York, Mass attendance has fallen to European levels, around 15 percent on an average Sunday, according to The New York Times. In Boston, it is even lower, around 12 percent.

Nationwide, only 24 percent of Catholics go to Mass on an average Sunday, down from 55 percent in 1965.

Our parish is doing a little better than the national average on Mass attendance. We see about 30 to 35 percent of our members on an average Sunday. We have 1,100 to 1,200 people at our five Sunday Masses (four in English and one in Spanish).

Who comes? Generally, it's the elderly, little children and their parents.

Who doesn't come? Young adults, ages 18 to 40, especially if they are single.

We follow the typical pattern. Except in some very unusual parishes like Old St. Patrick's in downtown Chicago or St. Mary's in College Station, Texas, young adults are the missing ingredient in parish life nearly everywhere.

To some extent, our attendance reflects local demographics. We have very few young adults living in our area. Housing is expensive. Good jobs are few.

Also, we are too rural. Single young adults would naturally rather live in nearby cities like Washington, D.C.; Baltimore; Richmond, Va.; or Annapolis, Md., where there are others of their tribe.

But even allowing for demographics, we have a problem. We wondered what we could do. So, in the spirit of Pope Francis, we decided to ask them, "Why don't you come to church?"

We announced a listening session to be facilitated by a doctor who is both a parishioner and the medical director of our local hospital. The forum was at a neutral setting, our parish theater. I hoped attendees could be comfortable talking frankly there.

By letter, we invited 500 young adults, all of whom have been confirmed in our parish in the last 25 years. We did not have good addresses for many, so we sent letters to their parents. We also put notices on our website and in the Sunday bulletin and sent out a blast of emails to every email address we had. We probably should have used Twitter and Instagram.

What happened?

Less than 10 percent of the 500 invited showed up.

The low attendance was discouraging. It told me that the church is irrelevant to their lives. They do not even care enough about church to come and tell us why they don't want to come. For them, the church is a dead letter, not good news.

Of the roughly 40 young adults who did attend, about half were still going to church most Sundays. These were not the truly alienated. A few even sing in the choir.

We recorded the session. After a brief opening prayer, I just sat in silence and listened. It was discouraging, but not surprising. Even the young adults who are still going to church were alienated from Catholicism as an institution to some extent.

The No. 1 issue by far, which came up over and over again, was the Catholic church's treatment of lesbians and gays. Everyone, conservative or liberal, disagreed with the church on that.
One young lady wrote me a note, saying, "Being gay is NOT a choice. [Emphasis hers.] Many of my friends are gay. I want to bring my gay friends to church -- but they do not feel accepted."

One young man, a lawyer, said the Catholic church is the "most sexist and homophobic institution of significance in our culture." He noted that there is no discussion of issues like women's ordination in the church. It is just not to be discussed. He felt the church just dismissed women's opinions.

He also said there is a complete lack of accountability for what is said from the pulpit. He cited in detail statements made by a priest at another parish regarding Obamacare and birth control. He said the statements were simply factually false, and no one held the priest accountable. He wrote to the archdiocese and not receive a reply.

The thing that most upset this young lawyer was our "inhospitable" policy regarding the reception of the Eucharist. He noted that the missalette in used in Catholic churches said non-Catholics were not welcome. At the Episcopal cathedral in Washington, D.C., where he had gone to Christmas services, he noted that everyone who wants to "deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ is welcome at Holy Communion." He felt strongly that Jesus would welcome everyone to his table. Even atheists should be welcomed.

One young woman followed up on his comments. She now attends a United Church of Christ. She said that our song "All Are Welcome" is hypocritical. "You say that all are welcome, but that is not true. Gays are not welcome. Catholics are the most judgmental group," she said. "If you don't follow all the precepts, you are excluded." She also cited our treatment of divorced and remarried Catholics.

A young mother in her 30s with four children was upset about birth control. She spoke of moving back to our community after a decade of living elsewhere. Her first Sunday back, she was confronted by a woman about natural family planning. She was told she was not in a state of grace because she was using birth control. She felt the church's teaching on birth control was unrealistic.

One woman, a Ph.D. candidate in the natural sciences, said she felt that her questions and doubts about the Bible, especially about science, were not answered. She said no one has really dealt with the "inaccuracies" in the Bible. She said there are many contradictions in the Scriptures. "Moses was a murderer," she said. All the war and killing in the Scriptures in the name of God bothered her. It was like terrorism today. She did not see how we could leave out the unpleasant parts and only read the nice things in church. It seemed dishonest to her.

A very thoughtful young woman talked of her own spiritual progress. When she was in college, she had seen the church as exclusionary. But at some point in her graduate studies, she "fell to her knees." She realized that she had no personal relationship to Jesus. She started going to small group discussions at a nondenominational church, where she felt accepted and not judged for her theological views. She also loved the praise and worship music, but she had come back to the Catholic church because it answered more of her questions.

One young man, who is a writer and a graduate student at an Ivy League school, said he does go church every Sunday, but he does not tell anyone on campus that he is Catholic. His friends see religion as purely "personal." He also said he has no Catholic friends at school. However, he likes going to Mass because it is the one hour of the week he does not have to worry about other distractions.

The moderator asked if "church is at the bottom of their to-do list." About half of the young adults said yes.

For several young people, time was a big problem. Their busy work schedules, especially on weekends, prevented Mass attendance. They really would like a Sunday evening Mass.

A young man in his 30s who was a convert to Catholicism said he was influenced by his young wife, who is a practicing Catholic. He is science-oriented, and at the forum, he was very critical of what he thought were inaccuracies in the church's teaching on birth control. He said he is very engaged in Scripture studies, both Protestant and Catholic. He said he felt he needed to search for answers himself. He was skeptical of the answers given by the church.

Several people thought church was boring, that they just didn't get anything out of it. However, I was surprised and pleased that several said they really liked Father Daly's homilies. That was gratifying. Reflecting on their religious education, they said they really like our retreats and confirmation program, but going to religious education in high school had been a "big social thing." (We have more than 100 teens here on Wednesday nights.)
Almost all of them had been on a mission trip or work camp experience. They all felt that those were positive experiences.
A young mother spoke up in defense of our parish. She said she had been a CAPE Catholic (Christmas, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, and Easter) growing up. Her mother, who was mentally unstable, had become a fanatical Catholic. However, she and her husband had chosen to live in Maryland because they thought the Catholicism here was more moderate than where they grew up on Long Island, N.Y. She said the homilies in our parish are "relevant" to her life.
One man thought heaven and hell were just scare tactics, but a young woman answered, "Yeah, but scare tactics work."
I was very sorry to hear from a young woman who became a fundamentalist Christian who now attends our local "megachurch." She said she wanted answers from the Bible, and she wanted a biblical quote for her questions. Oddly, she said she still considered herself a Catholic because she was confirmed. She did not seem to recall that we use the Bible as our only text in the high school program.
There were lighter moments. One man wanted the Mass explained more to the congregation. Why do we stand and kneel? He thought it was just Catholic calisthenics.
People kept coming back to music. One woman wrote me a note, saying she wanted the church to "rock out." She would like music like in the movie "Sister Act" with Whoopi Goldberg.
One encouraging thing was that nearly all of them had done some sort of mission trip or service project. They have gotten the message that to serve God is to serve others. That is good.
There was some real anger shown. One young man walked out after accusing us of hypocrisy. He said we did not understand the pressures of his life.
If our young adults are typical of formerly Catholic young adults, then we are in deep trouble. Will there be another generation of Catholics? I'm not sure.
I used to think that better catechesis was the problem. But they did not feel that they had not been taught the faith. We have a pretty thorough religious education program. They felt they knew "the stuff." It did not seem that pounding the catechism harder would have made them more sympathetic to the faith. Some, like the young lawyer, clearly knew what the Catholic church said in great detail. They just disagreed.
I agree with much of what they said. Even though it was hard to hear it, the pain was worthwhile.
When I left our parish theater, I felt a little discouraged. However, a couple of days later, upon reflection, I felt much better.
After all, these 40 to 50 young people were idealists. They have good hearts and good instincts. They want to respond to people with compassion and hospitality. They want what Jesus would want, that we live the law of love. They desire that all should be one in Christ.
That is what Jesus would want from them.
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