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January 17, 2019

From Desert to Parish: The Challenge of Disciple-Making



John the Baptist started in the desert. From there he "went throughout [the] whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). People listened. Even Jesus, the mighty Messiah whom John announced, presented himself to be baptized.

So began Jesus' public ministry. Recounting that event, we have begun the "ordinary" time of the liturgical year, in which we once again hear the call to discipleship.

If only the process were as simple as it was in the desert region!

Being a "Disciple"

The term is an unusual one. Being a "disciple" calls to mind the earliest associates of Jesus, who literally followed Him around as he spoke marvels and performed miracles. The disciple learned from the Master by remaining in his presence and taking it all in.

Being a disciple today could be akin to being an apprentice to an expert mentor. Except that this mentor is the Messiah, whom no one had ever experienced. And the "job" to be taught and learned has little to do with skill sets and everything to do with a way of life.

Discipleship conjures the image of an adventure, a novel kind of journey in which to explore a way of life. The act of following necessarily entails movement and change, and often involves learning new things. It takes courage simply to get up and go with the one who says, "Come, follow me."

But that's what Jesus says, and it seems He does so incessantly! To be a disciple is an open-ended message, a constant invitation, a commanding exhortation.

Becoming a Missionary Disciple

Pope Francis has untiringly championed the notion of discipleship. He links it to a practical sense of holiness and urges it for everyone as the "missionary" task of the Church.

As he explains in the [apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*](#) ("Rejoice and be glad"): "We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves" (no. 14).

Learning how to do that – how to become a "[missionary disciple](#)" – faces a significant challenge. The first disciples learned at the feet of the Master. His words and deeds had an immediate impact on them and were understood more fully through the gift of the Holy Spirit that came upon them.

Disciples today do not have such direct access to Jesus. Instead, the same Holy Spirit inspires growth in the faith through the mediation of the Church. What began in the Judean desert now needs to happen in parishes everywhere.

Given the [downward slide of Church attendance among U.S. Catholics](#), reported to be 39% on average, sounding and hearing that call appears ever more imperative. Disciple-making is urgently needed, but how does it work in parishes today?

The Disciple-Maker Index (DMI)

One answer to that question emerges through a vast [inventory of parish practice](#) surveyed on a continuing basis by the Catholic Leadership Institute. The DMI enables pastors and parishioners to reflect upon what is happening at the Church's local level, there where the vast majority of people encounter Jesus today.

The tool collects responses to 75 questions about spiritual growth, personal beliefs, communal relationships, and active engagement in the life of the parish. To-date, more than 111,000 people from 24 dioceses across North America have contributed to this snapshot of contemporary discipleship.

The contours of that picture take shape in a wide range of characteristics. Notions of "encountering" Jesus or being "formed" in the faith are foundational to discipleship. Current practices, such as the vibrancy of Mass and the quality of preaching, are critical to the experience of discipleship. Accepted understandings of Church teaching, about Sacred Scripture or salvation or sacraments, are necessary for discipleship to be a missionary "witness."

In future posts, we will delineate the findings and explore the implications of this study of parish life today. Our hope is to identify effective ways to support spiritual growth among believers.

Disciple-making remains a challenge, as it was when the Master called his first followers. But the benefits are eternal! As Pope Francis reminds us in his exhortation, "The Lord asks everything of us, and in return he offers us true life, the happiness for which we were created" (no. 1).

February 20, 2019

Close Encounters of the Divine Kind



It “changed movies forever.”

That’s the accolade given to the writing and direction of Steven Spielberg’s movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in 1977. His visionary genius brought us haunting theme music and dazzling special effects. More importantly though, the film has been deemed a “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” cinematic feat.

It has religious power, too. I recall my college philosophy professor expounding on the symbolism of light and dark, the supernatural allusions in the sights (the mountain) and sounds (the tonal call). He also mentioned the energizing depth of human desire and longing at work in this film.

I don’t know whether Pope Francis has seen the movie. Likewise, I don’t know if he’s familiar with classifying alien encounters under three kinds (sight, evidence, and contact). But the pope does show a penchant for proclaiming “encounter” as a defining experience for Christian life.

Encounters with the Master

With a Thomistic philosophical bent, Pope Francis describes the missionary disciple. According to the pope, the missionary disciple is “a self-transcending subject, a subject projected towards encounter: an encounter with the Master (who anoints us as his disciples) and an encounter with men and women who await the message.”

The first disciples experienced this transformative encounter directly; the Master called, and they followed. We who are his disciples today are privy to a different encounter. This encounter is not as close as that of the first disciples, but it is no less real. We experience it through our parish.

The Catholic Leadership Institute is studying the extent to which parish encounters transform the faithful through the Disciple-Making Index. The DMI is an ongoing survey completed to-date by more than 111,000 people across twenty-four dioceses in the U.S. and Canada. It provides helpful data about what draws people to a close encounter with the Master and just how close those encounters are.

The Impact of the Ordained

Respondents self-identify among four groups of disciples. The first (five percent) consider themselves Catholic but are not significantly affected by their faith. The second (twenty-seven percent) practice their faith but without a sense of knowing Jesus personally. The relative majority in the third group (thirty-five percent) “have personally encountered Jesus Christ and (are) growing as a disciple”. Those in the fourth (thirty-three percent) esteem their relationship with Jesus Christ as the most important in their lives.

What makes the difference between simply practicing the Faith and growing as a disciple? A close encounter with the divine! According to DMI data, three different kinds of encounter facilitate this kind of experience for churchgoers. They are the *personal*, in terms of the parish clergy, the *communal*, with respect to the parish populace; and the *liturgical*, by way of the parish Mass.

The first encounter begins with the clergy. People have always looked to encounter Jesus in those ordained to ministry. Specifically, those who see today’s pastors as providing strong leadership are four times more likely to report an experience of spiritual growth in the Faith. However, only about half of all respondents (fifty-three percent) strongly agree that they would recommend their pastor to friends. Furthermore, even fewer (forty percent) would recommend the other parish priests.

Community and Liturgy

People also encounter the Lord through interaction with others in the parish community. Evidence of this second kind appears in people feeling “welcome and accepted” in the parish; those who do so appear twice as likely to assert they are growing as disciples. But only forty-four percent of all respondents report strong agreement that this kind of encounter is happening.

The third, and closest, kind of encounter takes place *liturgically*. Each week, a parish offers people spiritual contact with the Lord. It does this in the proclamation of God’s Word through reading and preaching, and in communion with God through the Eucharist. When the Liturgy uplifts parishioners, they are almost twice as likely to claim growth in discipleship.

However, while ninety percent of DMI respondents report attending Mass weekly or more often, only thirty-six percent strongly agree that their Sunday experience is “vibrant and engaging.” Likewise, the same percentage strongly agree that the homilies they hear connect to their everyday lives.

Forty years ago, one movie featuring a mountaintop experience changed science fiction forever. Fifty years ago, the Second Vatican Council initiated a new way to experience the Church in the world. The data today suggests that, at the parish level, everyone plays an important part in this spiritual experience. Also, the data suggests that the clergy and liturgical ministers lead the way.

Next Time ...

But the survey also shows that we still have a way to go to reach the religious mountaintop. Stay tuned for the sequel! Our next post will dig deeper into the DMI. It will explore how parishes can help everyone make the journey toward a close encounter of the divine kind.

March 22, 2019

[What we need is a change of heart about Mass](#)



On Sundays, while my mother was alive, I would visit her after celebrating a parish Mass. She would usually greet me by asking, “How was church today?” With typical Irish wit (or brashness), I would reply, “He came, He died, He rose again – same as every week.”

Of course, she was wondering if the music was beautiful, how well the ministers served, and, especially, whether the preacher was any good that day! Aspects like these typically function as our rubric for determining the quality of the Mass. We use them to situate our liturgical experience on a continuum somewhere between the extremes of joyously uplifting and dreadfully boring.

The introduction of the third edition of the [Roman Missal](#) intended to enhance that quality. The new translations sought to render the language in a way befitting its sacred character, with more

stylized phrasing and less commonplace vocabulary. Though parts remain uncomfortable to many an English ear, the words we now speak at Mass are becoming more familiar. Still, one wonders whether the changes improved or impeded our shared liturgical experience.

What's meant by a change of heart?

At last month's plenary assembly of the Congregation for Divine Worship, [Pope Francis addressed that question](#). He highlighted "the indispensable role the liturgy holds in the Church and for the Church," reminding the participants that "The liturgy is in fact the main road through which Christian life passes through every phase of its growth."

But the pope also noted "that it is not enough to change the liturgical books to improve the quality of the liturgy. ... For life to be truly a praise pleasing to God, it is indeed necessary to change the heart. Christian conversion is oriented to this conversion, which is an encounter of life with the 'God of the living' (Mt 22:32)."

That conversion involves the whole of one's life, as it draws from and contributes to worship of God. But it also entails a change of heart with regard, specifically, to our experience of the sacred liturgy. Recent research supports this need.

A need for conversion

Data from more than 122,000 respondents to [The Disciple-Maker Index](#) indicates the critical role that Mass plays in people's estimation of parish life and its effect on their spiritual growth. The Sunday experience is a key driver in respondents' sense of progress in the faith; those having a strongly positive experience are 1.8 times more likely to believe they are growing as disciples.

Yet the parish experience on Sundays appears to be wanting. Of the 55% of respondents who strongly agree that they would recommend their parish to a friend, only 59% of them strongly associate that with their Mass experience. Worse still, 90% of all respondents say they attend Mass weekly or more often, but only 37% of them strongly agree that the parish helps them grow spiritually by offering vibrant and engaging Sunday liturgies. This may explain why 31% of all respondents have never invited someone to join them for Mass in the past year, and 42% have done so only once or twice.

Conversion seems desperately needed. Where can we begin?

What's being celebrated?

It would be easy to say we need better hymns and homilies – and we do! It would likewise be true that we can improve the quality of other liturgical aspects, from the sacred beauty of the environment to the functioning of all who minister there (cantors, lectors, servers, ushers, etc.).

But these elements do not touch upon the heart of the matter. For that, all of us – clergy and faithful, alike – need an inner conversion with respect to how we approach the Sunday experience.

The celebration of the event (i.e., the "staging" of the Mass) provides an important focus, but this limits the concern to what we do. Focusing, instead, on the event being celebrated shifts our regard to *what God is doing for us*.

What awaits us each week?

In this respect, every Mass is wondrously the same: through the power of the Holy Spirit, the “God of the living” speaks his Word of salvation and offers that to us through the most blessed sacrament that memorializes the death and resurrection of His Son. Every Sunday, as I tried to tell mom, Jesus comes again to be God-with-us.

When a parish approaches the liturgy in this way, it will be inspired to devote all the resources at its disposal to the celebration of vibrant and engaging Masses. And when each of us realizes that God’s saving presence is what awaits us in church each week, we can’t help but be uplifted.

April 16, 2019

Running a race for the Church’s future



Last Fall one of the ancient world’s larger entertainment venues, the [Circus Maximus](#), hosted a [prayer vigil with young Italians](#). There, in a stadium known for chariot racing, Pope Francis urged the raucous yet reverent crowd to keep running the Christian race, “attracted by the face of Christ, whom we love so much, whom we adore in the Holy Eucharist and acknowledge in the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters.” “The Church,” he said, “needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith.”

That need underlies his newest [apostolic exhortation](#). Entitled *Christus Vivit*, the papal document responds, by way of summary and summons, to last year’s [Synod of Bishops](#). It aims to remind young people, and all of us, “of certain convictions born of our faith, and at the same time to encourage [them] to grow in holiness and in commitment to [their] personal vocation” (no. 3).

Necessary on account of their age, that encouragement also serves a strategic purpose. If the future of the Church [depends on engaging the next generation](#), we must attend now to strengthening their affiliation and participation.

An analysis of [The Disciple-Maker Index](#), a parish-based survey completed by more than 128,000 people in twenty-four (arch)dioceses, suggests that those in the next generation (ages 18-35) experience parish life in ways similar to the overall population. Actually, more younger parishioners (57%) than older ones (52%) believe that the Church is critical to their relationship with God, though both these rates run rather low.

If, as we believe, the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (*Catechism*, no. 1324-1327), then the critical Church relationship with the next generation will develop, primarily, through their active participation in a parish’s liturgical life.

Interestingly, 92% of the younger DMI respondents do attend Mass on at least a monthly basis. If only they would get their peers to come along! But just 21% report that they have invited someone to join them for Mass in the past year.

To be more inviting, parishes need to offer a worthwhile Sunday experience. In his [Letter to Artists](#) (no. 16), St. John Paul II wisely claimed, using words of Doestoevsky, “beauty will save the world.” In that case, parish liturgical experiences should exhibit a divine aesthetic that distinguishes Sunday from other days. That beauty ought to be manifest in the church environs (art and architecture), in a “welcoming” people, and especially in the ritual celebration.

But the young don’t currently see it that way. Only 39% strongly agree that the Sunday Mass is a vibrant and engaging experience and that the homilies they hear connect their faith with their everyday lives. Just 21% of them participate in Eucharistic adoration on even a monthly basis. Without experiencing the beauty of meaningful worship, young people may choose to spend their time elsewhere than in Church.

Those who do show up on Sundays will be more engaged the more they understand. The ancient dictum – “*lex orandi, lex credendi*” – reminds us that praying shapes believing, and vice-versa. Parishes, then, have a responsibility to teach the faith to future worshippers.

Currently, only 69% of young people strongly agree that the Eucharist really is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Without understanding the truth underlying and expressed in our worship, young people will be hard pressed to appreciate why we do what we do on Sundays, a frustration that may lead them to drift away.

Finally, through active participation in the liturgy and thoughtful understanding of the faith, young people become poised for more. As the Holy Father puts it: “Filled with the love of Christ, young people are called to be witnesses of the Gospel wherever they find themselves, by the way they live” (no. 175). To foster this, parishes need to work intentionally at assisting young people to grow in holiness.

However, only 42% of young people strongly agree that their parish helps them develop spiritually as Catholics, and even fewer (28%) strongly agree that the parish helps to form them as disciples

of Jesus. Absent valuable opportunities to realize goodness in their own and others' lives, our youth may question whether the effort to do so is really worth it.

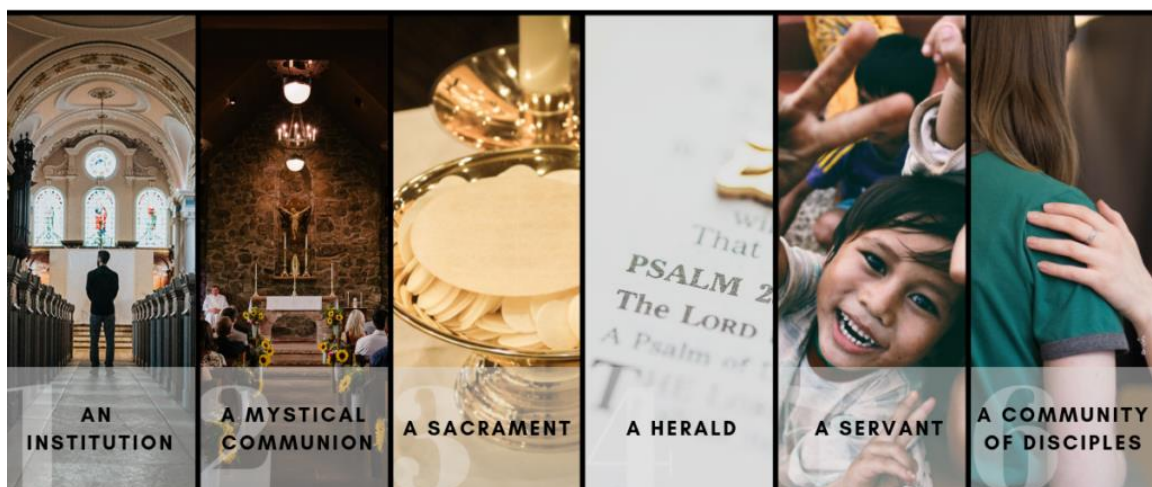
Pope Francis has exhorted young people to run the race of their lives through their Christian vocation. Parishes are now challenged to invest in them, with experiences of praying, believing, and living that will manifest the grace-filled connection of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. When that happens, parishes can [come back to life](#) and thrive for generations to come.

June 24, 2019

Models of the Church that Embody Christ



THE MODELS OF THE CHURCH



In his heyday, [Cardinal Avery Dulles](#) (1918-2008) famously employed “models” as a way to explain foundational truths of the faith. His books *Models of the Church* (1974), and *Models of Revelation* (1983), educated scores of seminarians and university students around the world.

Models aid our understanding by rendering concepts in visual forms; in turn, they also show how something functions. When that something touches upon the supernatural, models make the mysteries more meaningful by comparison to things more naturally known.

Clinging to the Model of Christ

Dulles originally proposed five [models of the Church](#):

1. an institution (with structured order, roles, and practices),
2. a mystical communion (uniting members in a shared faith),

3. a sacrament (as sign and instrument in the world),
4. a herald (with the mission of announcing the Good News of the Kingdom of God),
5. a servant (committed to social justice).

To these he later added a sixth model, a community of disciples, as a way of integrating the others through an emphasis on the Church's never-ending task of following the Lord Jesus.



The cardinal's fellow Jesuit, Pope Francis, recently introduced a new model relevant to our age of digital media. In his [message for this year's World Communications Day](#), the pope points to the Church as a social network. His message highlights the need to transform online networks, built on superficial "connections," into real human communities that reflect "the foundation and

importance of our being-in-relation.” This, he says, mirrors the image of the Trinity and distinguishes us as persons and not merely individuals.

For Pope Francis, the Church as social network highlights the connectedness of our shared faith, in which “we are members one of another” (Ephesians 4:25). He concludes his message with the claim that:

“The Church herself is a network woven together by Eucharistic communion, where unity is based not on ‘likes’, but on the truth, on the ‘Amen’, by which each one clings to the Body of Christ, and welcomes others.”

The pope’s model inspires further reflection on the [meaning](#) and [functioning](#) of the Church in a world of social communications. This is particularly important in light of church closings and a shortage of priest personnel. His emphasis on community and communion also invites us to consider how our parishes embody this model in everyday practice.

The Importance of Parish Involvement

Through the [The Disciple Maker Index](#), the Catholic Leadership Institute has surveyed people nationwide regarding their experience of parish life. Collectively, the data indicate that fostering the communal dimension of the Church is one of the best practices a parish can follow to inspire discipleship. Whether in terms of liturgical celebration, charitable service, or simply social gatherings, parish life thrives when the entire community is involved and engaged.

Unlike online communities, parish involvement strives to be mission-oriented, need-based, and person-centered. In each of these areas, the DMI data point to where we can do more.

Parishes fulfill their mission to be a community of disciples by connecting people not only with God but also with one another. Making information about their Catholic community easy to find is a practice that 47 percent of respondents strongly agree happens in their parish. But only 26 percent strongly agree that the parish follows up with them when they express interest in becoming more involved, and only 21 percent strongly agree that the parishes involve them in important decision-making about the community.

A Welcoming Approach

In terms of serving the needs of others in the community, only 37 percent strongly agree that the parish provides them with opportunities to do so. Even fewer (35 percent) acknowledge that they have volunteered their service sometime in the past year.

Most significant to fostering the local Catholic community is the person-centeredness of a parish. The faithful point decidedly to the importance of any parish making its members feel welcomed and accepted. Those who responded with strong agreement (43 percent) are more likely to credit their parish with helping them to grow spiritually. They are also more likely to recommend their parish to others. This welcoming approach—an embodiment of the belief that “we are (all) members one of another”—remains a key to differentiating those reporting that they practice the Faith from those who do not.

In his message, Pope Francis reminds us:

“God is not Solitude, but Communion; he is Love, and therefore communication, because love always communicates; indeed, it communicates itself in order to encounter the other.”

Therefore, in a Church that strives to be a true network of believers, our parishes need to communicate that love in ways that foster ever greater encounters among and on behalf of their parishioners.

July 22, 2019

What twenty-somethings think of parish life



Talk of the “soul” usually brings to mind something unchanging, even immortal—the core of our humanity that outlasts death. While it informs our bodily existence, the soul differs from our physical being since it doesn’t develop, age, and decline like our bodies do. It’s just there (somewhere) in us. Ultimately, it is who we are.

So to speak of “*The Twentysomething Soul*”, the title of a forthcoming book from Oxford University Press, is intriguing. Based on a national survey of 1,880 twenty-somethings and interviews with more than two-hundred young adults, this book offers a look at the religious and secular lives of American young adults, those persons commonly, but perhaps mistakenly, called “the lost generation.”

To quote **the marketing blurb**:

“The Twentysomething Soul tells an optimistic story about American twenty-somethings by introducing readers to the full spectrum of American young adults, many of whom live purposefully, responsibly, and reflectively. Some prioritize faith and involvement in a religious congregation. Others reject their childhood religion to explore alternatives and practice a personal spirituality. Still others sideline religion and spirituality until their lives get settled, or reject organized religion completely.”

Breaking Down the Young Adult Demographic

Writing for the Association of Religion Data Archives, [Richard Cimino](#) offers a few tidbits of what readers will find in this study. The number of Christian twenty-somethings is larger than the population of Texas, and roughly six out of ten affiliate with Catholic and Protestant traditions. However, greater percentages of them are “nominal” rather than “active” in their religious identity.

What all of the active Christian twenty-somethings value is “a strong sense of community, an emphasis on spiritual experience, and pastoral leadership (especially good preaching) in their churches.” Denominational differences lead to varying points of emphasis, namely the Eucharist (for Catholics), social justice (for mainline Protestants), or good preaching (for Evangelicals).

The Disciple-Maker Index

To gauge what the Catholic twenty-somethings think about these values in terms of their actual experience of parish life, we can consult [The Disciple-Maker Index](#) (DMI). As a caveat, however, “twenty-something” in the DMI encompasses a less well-defined group since the data categorizes responses from those aged 18-25 and 26-35.

Still considered young adults, these two cohorts comprise roughly seven percent of the total number of respondents (131,844) from parishes across the U.S. and Canada. Regarding their own religious identity, the twenty-somethings mirror the make-up of the entire DMI since ninety-three percent identify as practicing Catholics, growing as disciples, or cultivating a personal relationship with Jesus.

The Faith and Everyday Life Connection

In terms of a strong sense of community, the DMI includes multiple data points about parishioners’ experience of being connected with a local Catholic community. For all respondents, the primary question, and a key differentiator between those who do or do not practice their faith, concerns whether or not they feel welcome and accepted at the parish. Among the DMI twenty-somethings, forty-five percent strongly agree that they feel a sense of parish community.

In terms of an emphasis on spiritual experience, the points of comparison are not exactly the same. According to the DMI data, thirty-nine percent of the young adults strongly agree that their parish does help people grow spiritually as Catholics.

In terms of pastoral leadership, thirty-five percent of the DMI twenty-somethings would recommend their pastor to a friend. Forty percent of them strongly agree that what they hear from the pulpit is helpful at connecting faith with everyday life. (Overall, these factors remain two of

the top five drivers in whether parishioners recommend their parish to others and whether they view the parish as helping them to grow spiritually.)

A Lost Generation?

Regarding the specifically Catholic points of emphasis, eighty-four percent of the DMI twenty-somethings report that they attend Mass at least weekly, yet a mere thirty-nine percent strongly agree that their Sunday experience is vibrant and engaging. Moreover, only sixty-nine percent of them strongly believe that the Eucharist really is the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

While the topics of inquiry in *The Twentysomething Soul* and the DMI do not align exactly, nevertheless it can be instructive to see the gap between what young people say they value and what they report in terms of their actual parish experience.

Fewer than half of twenty-somethings claim to experience what the new research says they value in a church community. Catholic parish leaders would do well to consider how to feed these young souls more deeply. Otherwise, they may, in fact, become a lost generation.

August 16, 2019

How accurate is the Pew survey on the Eucharist?



The headline screamed for attention: “Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ.”

That's how [Pew Research](#) pushed a "fact-tank" article about transubstantiation. The jarring conclusion came at the beginning:

"In fact, nearly seven-in-ten Catholics (69%) say they personally believe that during Catholic Mass, the bread and wine used in Communion 'are *symbols* of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.' Just one-third of U.S. Catholics (31%) say they believe that 'during Catholic Mass, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus.'"

Shock waves soon followed.

Among those apoplectic about the assertions is Bishop Robert Barron, arguably the most well-known Catholic apologist of our day. In an "animated" [video response](#), he considers the PEW data to confirm two distressing realities about the present state of evangelization.

The bishop's own words turn up the fire on what he calls, in general, the "massive failure" on the part of educators (of all sorts) in the Church to carry on our own traditions. More specifically, he points to the inherently futile mentality in the Church that thinks we can divide apologetics (the defense of ideas) and pastoral friendliness (being nice), and should separate concern for doctrine (core beliefs) from that of social work (justice in action).

The bishop is right.

Our faith is born from and expressed in theology (speech about God). Theology, in turn, remains a matter of "faith seeking understanding," as St. Anselm once defined it. What we believe, we try to understand further; when we understand further, we believe more deeply. To grow in the faith means to engage in this cyclical process of seeking God.

Different Survey, Different Results

In terms of understanding how research reports fit into this search process, we need to appreciate how data is derived. Otherwise, headlines become harbingers of truths that may not hold true.

One factor to consider here is sample size. The [Disciple Maker Index](#), administered by the Catholic Leadership Institute, has currently surveyed 131,845 Catholics around the country about multiple themes connected with parish life. (By contrast, the PEW survey was based on 1,835 Catholics in a total sample population of 10,971.)

When asked about doctrines of the faith, seventy-two percent of the DMI respondents strongly agreed with the statement "I personally believe the Eucharist really is the body and blood of Jesus Christ." Another nineteen percent agreed with that statement. That's almost 120,000 Catholics claiming they do agree with what the Church teaches, compared to the 569 respondents highlighted in the PEW headline.

Words, Words, Words

A second factor to consider concerns the wording of the survey. As Mark Gray from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) [points out](#), data gathered depends on the questions asked.

The PEW Research referred to the “actual” presence of Jesus in the bread and wine compared to the bread and wine being (mere) symbols of that presence. Gray theorizes that asking instead about Christ’s “real” presence in the Eucharist would have yielded different results, since “actual” in common parlance tends to mean “factually present as proven by empirical observation.” We’ll see if that turns out to be true when CARA tests the question later this year.

Until then, Catholic theologians and teachers will always have work to do in communicating belief in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, since the notion and reality of transubstantiation remains “[an inexhaustible mystery](#).” But the challenge does not absolve us of the responsibility to inculcate in every generation the central truths of what we believe.

Empty Faith Leads to Empty Pews

So, too, the faithful have a responsibility to seek an ever more mature understanding of what they believe. That understanding doesn’t devolve from headlines, nor is it formed by data. It takes continuing education, well beyond what was taught in parochial school or catechesis. If our faith really matters, we will desire to appreciate what it truly means.

A veteran teacher in a local Catholic elementary school recently reminded me why this topic is so important. Looking ahead to a project-based learning series on the Eucharist for her new students, she pondered aloud the potential impact of this lesson plan:

“People don’t go to Mass because they don’t believe in the Real Presence, and they don’t believe in the Real Presence because if it were true, then wouldn’t the churches be full?”

There’s a lesson there for all of us.

September 26, 2019

Seeing is believing: Using visual tech at Mass



The well-known idiom, in use since 1639, characterizes today's scientific way of thinking: seeing is believing. It suggests that we truly know something only when we have concrete evidence or unassailable logic. **When it comes to religion**, however, adopting it appears counter-factual. After all, **the Bible** tells us: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1).

Without delving into the dichotomy between science and faith, or correcting the **mistaken assumption** that they are contradictory, we can appropriate the meaning of the idiom differently when it comes to being in church.

Faith Seen through Actions

St. Paul poses the epistemological point, but with regard to another of the five senses: "How can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach?" (Romans 10:14).

Disciple-making clearly requires speaking and hearing. While that seems patently obvious, proclaiming the gospel constitutes the missionary mandate of the Church as dictated by the risen Jesus to his disciples: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Though no mention is made of seeing, that sense also factors into the Faith. We know the power of giving testimony or witness to the Faith. We celebrate martyrs and saints as people whose faith could be seen through their actions. These holy ones are “living stones” of the Church in its biblical origins (1 Peter 2:5) and throughout its history.

Reaching the Back Pews

In today’s Church, seeing is needed for believing in another sense. Without being able to see what’s going on there, participation by the congregation is diminished, if not doomed. Without being able to participate at this most basic level, parishioners understandably become no-shows.

Classic church architecture has recognized the importance of hearing. In some sites, the pulpit is raised above the nave where people congregate; some are higher still than the sanctuary. Thus, the Word, proclaimed and preached, transcends the din below and calls the assembly upward. Microphones now project the sound throughout the building.

But seeing is a challenge yet unaddressed. In many churches, the largest number of seats are situated at the greatest distance from the spot where the action takes place. Who hasn’t jokingly pointed out that Catholics always sit in the back pews?

But this reality makes it hard for many people to see what’s happening. It’s especially hard on children, whose short stature and even shorter attention span already put them at a disadvantage.



Unseen Glory

Why not use technology to facilitate sight, as we have done with microphones for sound? If what is happening in the sanctuary is not simply intended for those ministering there, why not make it viewable to everyone, even those in the back of church?

We live in a visual culture. Images are now more prominent than texts. Anyone with a phone can be a photographer. Videos are a staple of communications, with screens now prominent at any large gathering of people. Even children, at alarmingly earlier ages, grow up with screens to occupy their attention.

Yet in church, the sacred celebrations that have such unparalleled religious significance cannot easily be seen by many.

Participation Requires Attention

Throughout history, visual arts—icons and statues and sacred symbols—have contributed to the sacramental sensibility at the core of religious belief. Spirituality benefits deeply from the

cultivation of a **religious imagination**. For faith to flourish, it must be seen—materially, conceptually, and existentially.

As worship leads to witness, so inspiration precedes exemplification. Larger parishes today need to facilitate the former terms, by remedying the viewing problem in their churches.

Placing a video screen on every church pillar can be done with decorum. Livestreaming events, or using closed circuit television, would make the sacred action more visible; it may even calm the otherwise rambunctious children, thereby allowing their parents and the nearby congregants to worship more attentively. Given the number of young people learning and working in the fields of social communications, finding assistance to make this happen should not be difficult and could be advantageous as outreach to that generation.

If what takes place in church is essential to the lived experience of the Faith, and if conscientious participation first demands attention to what is going on, then seeing is certainly needed for believing.

October 14, 2019

The Power of Popular Devotions in Parish Life



Paul Newman, in the movie *Cool Hand Luke*, lonesomely strums a banjo while singing these lyrics:

*I don't care if it rains or freezes,
Long as I got my Plastic Jesus,
Sitting on the dashboard of my car.
It comes in colors pink and pleasant,
glows in the dark 'cause it's iridescent,
Take it with you when you travel far.*

As [Raymond Crooke explains](#), the “Plastic Jesus” tune originally began as a radio advertisement marketing the sale of statuettes. Composers Ed Rush and George Cromarty turned it into a parody targeting sellers of religious kitsch. While superficially sacrilegious, the campy lyrics rightly point to a potential problem with religious devotion: the tendency to accept plastic or illusion over substance.

Substance Matters!

The actual Plastic Jesus, also known as Dashboard Jesus, was popularized through the efforts of Fr. Gregory Bezy, SCJ, who in 1955 established the [Sacred Heart Auto League](#) as a way to encourage careful driving. The League distributed to its members a small statue or image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus which could be affixed to a car's dashboard. In plain sight to drivers and passengers, the image sought to inspire prayer, thus transforming the ordinary and routine activity of travel into an expression of devotion.

The substance of that devotion owes its prominence to the life and work of [St. Margaret Mary Alacoque](#) (1647-1690), a nun in the monastery of the Visitation of Holy Mary at [Paray-le-Monial](#) (France). The Lord Jesus appeared to St. Margaret Mary in a series of visions. In those mystical encounters, the Lord revealed to her the depths of divine love for humanity. God called her to promote devotion to his Sacred Heart. He asked her to do this by promoting holy hours of adoration, the novena on First Fridays, and a universal feast day in the Church. Owing to the centenary of the canonization of this “Apostle of the Sacred Heart” next May, Visitation monasteries around the world are celebrating a [jubilee year](#) that begins on October 16, the feast of St. Margaret Mary.

Popular Piety

Catholic devotions have long been associated with the Sacred Heart, the Eucharist, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and other saints or sacred events. These prayers and practices remain popular because they reflect a homespun religiosity that speaks to the lived experience of the faithful throughout history. As Pope St. John Paul II explains it:

“Popular piety is an expression of faith which avails of certain cultural elements proper to a specific environment which is capable of interpreting and questioning in a lively and effective manner the sensibilities of those who live in that same environment.” ([Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy](#), 4)

Devotions in Today's Parishes

In today's parish environment, Catholic devotions serve as both an effective introduction to, and a vibrant expression of, the Faith. One tool that indicates the significant role these religious practices play in parish life is the [Disciple Maker Index](#) (DMI). The DMI is a comprehensive research project with survey responses from more than 131,000 parishioners in six hundred parishes in thirty dioceses (to-date).

Eighty-one percent of all respondents state that they have participated in parish devotions at least once in the past year. Older generations participate with greater frequency. This might be due to their stronger familiarity with religious traditions and greater availability since they have fewer constraints on their time. But across all age brackets, forty-two percent of all parishioners frequented some sort of devotion monthly or more often.

Among those who did participate in at least one parish devotion in the past year, forty-two percent of them strongly agree that their parish helps them grow spiritually as a Catholic. And more than half of them (fifty-eight percent) strongly agree that they would recommend their parish to a friend.

More than a Plastic Jesus

Other factors exert greater influence on driving positive experiences of parish life. These factors then lead to a recommendation of the parish to others. Chief among these factors is parishioners' appreciation of their pastor. Nevertheless, there remains a significantly high correlation between the positive experience of a parish, acknowledged spiritual growth as a Catholic, and matters of worship (including [Mass](#), preaching, and devotions).

Therefore, it's reasonable to conclude that various forms of popular piety still attract people to church. Today's parish devotions, such as the Forty Hours of Eucharistic Adoration or the novena of Masses for the Sacred Heart, capitalize on local cultures and historic customs. These give the faithful an opportunity to put their faith into practice in familiar ways.

Tacky marketing aside, the substance of Catholic devotion provides a welcome aid to travelers along the road of life in today's world.

December 16, 2019

Are Young Adult Catholics “Resilient Disciples” Connected to Parishes?



Not just our future, but our present—that’s how Pope Francis has characterized the place of young adults in the Church. Indeed, those aged eighteen to thirty-five are no longer the *next* generation; they are active now in all walks of life and, as such, represent a cohort of pressing concern for parish vitality (and sustainability).

Recently published findings from The Barna Group address this age group specifically. Based on information gathered from 15,369 young adults in twenty-five countries, *The Connected Generation* aims to equip Church leaders “not only to better understand 18–35-year-olds around the world, but also to truly partner with them in discipleship and support them in their callings.”

According to the study’s senior writer, Alyce Youngblood, “The research reveals a generation of driven adults who are wary and weary, wrestling with questions, longing for deeper relationships and facing significant societal, professional and personal obstacles. Yet,” she adds, “we also found that faith is one important factor associated with their well-being, connection and resilience.”

Outside the Sanctuary

Closer to home, *The Disciple Maker Index* from the Catholic Leadership Institute “invites parishioners to reflect on where they are on their journey of discipleship and identify their parish’s effectiveness in supporting that journey.” The DMI focuses on Catholic parishioners of all ages, rather than a single generation of any faith, and the experiences it surveys are more narrowly focused than those in the Barna study. Nevertheless, by segmenting the DMI data according to the

same age group (currently 8,473 respondents), we discover some interesting complements between the two research projects.

One key finding of *The Connected Generation* refers to the formation of “[resilient discipleship](#),” a concept explained by the Barna Group’s president, David Kinnaman, in a [book](#) about today’s new context for Christian faithfulness. Resilient disciples are those who:

1. attend church regularly and engage their faith community beyond worship
2. trust firmly in the authority of the Bible
3. are committed personally to [Jesus](#) and affirm his death and resurrection
4. desire to have their faith impact the whole of their lives.

Using a similar metric, the Barna report finds that 14 percent of the young adults who grew up in the Christian faith show the marks of being resilient disciples. Why this matters, the authors conclude, is because “resilience, more than just dutiful attendance, compels them *outside* the sanctuary.”

An Engaged Faith

Looking to the DMI cohort, we see similar marks of resilience.

The vast majority (92 percent) attends church on at least a monthly basis, including 81 percent of whom do so weekly or more. Beyond Sunday worship, they engage their faith in other ways, by participating on at least a monthly basis in:

- devotions, such as novenas and feast days (34 percent)
- [Bible studies](#) or prayer groups (26 percent)
- Eucharistic Adoration (24 percent)
- sacramental confession (14 percent)
- classes or workshops about the Faith (12 percent).

Concerning their trust in the authority of [the Bible](#), more than two-thirds of the DMI respondents (69 percent) strongly affirm having a personal belief in Sacred Scripture as the Word of God.

Still, More Needs to Be Done

In terms of personal commitment, 24 percent report that their “relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship in my life.” Even more, 80 percent of them strongly agree that Jesus “died and rose from the dead for my salvation” (with another 15 percent simply agreeing with this belief).

As for the impact of the Faith on their words and deeds, the former is suggested in the DMI by how frequently persons in this age group share faith stories, and the latter by how often they volunteer for service. On a monthly or more basis, young Catholic adults say they share their own personal witness story (21 percent) or the story of Jesus (29 percent). With the same frequency, more than three in ten (31 percent) volunteer to serve a member of the community.

For resilient disciples everywhere, growing in faith appears to be a significant personal concern. Nearly two-thirds in *The Connected Generation* say it's the primary reason for their going to Church. Among DMI respondents of the same age, forty-three percent strongly agree that their parish helps them attain this spiritual growth; in turn, 58 percent strongly agree that they would recommend their parish to others.

It would seem, then, that Catholic parishes do comparably well in connecting with young adults. Still, the relative percentages indicate that fostering the Faith of this generation needs further attention, for the well-being of the entire Church, in our present and our future.



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