

THE PARISH EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG ADULTS

The fifteenth ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops opens this week in the Vatican to discuss "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment." Select bishops from around the world will gather to listen, present, and dialogue about issues pertinent to the future of the Church present now in the younger generation.

Meetings with members of that generation, and consultations throughout the global Church, have given rise to a wide range of topics for discussion, all guided by a desire that the Synod engage with and listen to young people. In their quest for "communities that are supportive, uplifting, authentic and accessible: communities that empower them,"¹ young people turn to the Church and parishes as a "family of families" that can provide formative spiritual models, educational pathways, and liturgical celebrations that manifest God to them.²

But what do they say about their Church "family"? How should we interpret young people's assessment of parish life? And what might parishes do to enhance that experience?

Data that will help to answer these questions comes from the "Disciple Maker Index," a 75-question survey administered by the Catholic Leadership Institute and completed by parishioners throughout the U.S. and Canada. More than 102,000 people in twenty-three dioceses have participated in the survey over the past five years. From their responses, we can extract what young people (age 18-25) report about their own parish experiences.

While pastoral ministry engages young people in a wide variety of program, activities, and organizations, parish life remains the focal point of Church experience. At the parish level, but not exclusively so, the fruits of the Synod will need to be actualized. Consequently, the way in which young people currently view parish life becomes an important baseline for the missionary and pastoral renewal that the Synod hopes to generate throughout the Church.

The complete Disciple Maker Index addresses a number of factors along the Catholic spiritual journey, including personal religious beliefs, connections with others in the local community, continuing conversation and education about faith, and participation in the devotional life of the parish. This brief report offers an overview of the responses given by young adults to ten survey items directly related to the focal points of the Synod's theme.

A first consideration focuses on areas of interest relevant specifically to young people. On the one hand, these digital natives are immersed in the world of technology, where they seek information according to the logic of the Internet. But when it comes to their community of faith, only 52% of them strongly agree that information about their parish is easy to find by way of social communications. On the other hand, young people also value the logic of faith as they seek to discern their future. Yet only 34% of them strongly agree that parishes equip them to recognize how God is working in their lives and to converse about it.

Given the pervasive impact of social communications in today's world, the logic of "searching" remains an apt descriptor of this younger generation's approach to life, including their search for meaning through faith. The digital realm is where young people dwell, if not exclusively then primarily, and there the newer means of social communications exercise a significant impact on their identity and way of life.³ As such, the Church should recognize that it will most readily encounter young people in the digital realm. Consequently, parishes need to adopt new ways of communicating and make themselves more accessible through social media and other online spaces.

A second consideration focuses on the faith. At a foundational level, this comes to expression in core beliefs about God and the Church. On average, 78% of young people strongly agree that they "personally believe Jesus died and rose from the dead for (their) salvation." When asked if they "personally believe the Eucharist really is the body and blood of Jesus Christ," 68% strongly agree. But in terms of their belief that "the Church is critical to (their) relationship with God," only 59% strongly agree.

In light of the Christian creed, the Paschal Mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, as well as God's real and ongoing presence among us in and through the sacramental mystery of the Church, are foundations of Catholic faith and life. Knowing these core beliefs, assenting to them, and living by them are how the faithful of all ages become disciples, not in name only but in practice. Accordingly, parishes need to renew their efforts at evangelization, adapting them in particular ways to the younger generation that has had less experience with specifically Catholic educational institutions.

A final consideration focuses on young people's experience of their parish, which remains the prime locus for their vocational discernment. A strong 75% of them state that they attend Mass on a daily or weekly basis, yet only 46% of young people report feeling "welcomed and accepted" in the local Catholic community. Only 40% of them strongly agree that their parish offers "vibrant and engaging Sunday Masses," with just 41% strongly agreeing that they hear "preaching and homilies that connect (their) faith with (their) everyday life." In terms of their overall experience, only 45% of young people strongly agree that their parish helps them to grow spiritually as a Catholic, while a mere 31% strongly agree that their parish is helping to form them "as a disciple of Jesus Christ."

The primary purpose of a parish is to help people grow in their relationship with God. To appreciate that relationship, and live accordingly, positive experiences of faith formation, liturgical worship, and homiletic communication are necessary. This is especially true for young people, for whom "experience" is the normative key to meaningfulness. Their lived experience of the faith, and the discernment of their vocation in the faith, depends to a great extent on how that faith is shared, celebrated, and preached in parishes. While many factors contribute to parish life, the evidence consistently shows these areas to be the key drivers in all parishioners' view of the Church. As a result, most parishes would do well to re-examine, and adjust as necessary, the extent to which they dedicate resources of time, treasure, and talent to the Sunday experience.

Elsewhere one can find evidence of a growing disaffiliation with the Church among young Catholic. Pew Research Center reports find that young millennials (ages 18-24) represent the largest contingent of the approximately 56 million adults in the U.S. that are religiously unaffiliated (the "nones"). A qualitative study published earlier this year informs us as to why that generation appears to be "Going, Going, Gone."⁴

Looking to those who do remain affiliated, as evidenced by the Disciple Maker Index, it becomes rather clear that the role of the parish looms large in young people's experience of the faith and, consequently, in their vocational discernment. Looking ahead to their future, and consequently the future of parish life in the Church, taking these views of young people into account becomes a pastoral necessity.

At present, that view is disconcerting. Compared to findings in previous surveys, almost all of the most recent (2018) responses from young people to the questions cited above are lower than their high points and their five-year averages. But the downturn is not relegated to the young; their views are roughly equivalent to the percentages of strong agreement found among all others who responded to the same questions on the survey.

Still, there is a silver lining. The less-than-positive assessment of their parish experience does not seem to have deterred young people from attending Mass, with 85% of them in 2018 indicating that they frequent the liturgy on a daily or weekly basis, and an additional 8% reporting a monthly attendance. Thus, young people today still seem to value their connection with the Church.

In turn, the objective of the current Synod is to renew the Church's connection to the young. Seeking to reaffirm the Church's pastoral and missionary accompaniment of this generation, the Synod's working document confirms the key role played by parishes: "From the standpoint of local communities, the parish – the Church in the midst of homes – is the customary place for pastoral care and its validity has been clearly reiterated in our age." But the document also notes the perception of some bishops' conferences, that parishes "do not seem to be adequate places for young people, who turn to different Church experiences that are more in tune with their mobility, life places and spiritual search."⁵

Thus, for the present and future vitality of the Church, addressing the parish experience remains a pressing issue. In that experience, all the faithful, young and old, can contribute to fulfilling the Church's mission and mandate to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19).

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¹ Final Document from the Pre-Synodal Meeting (Rome, 19-24 March 2018), no. 1.

² *Instrumentum Laboris* ("working document") for the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (Rome, 8 May 2018), no. 178.

³ Final Document from the Pre-Synodal Meeting, no. 4.

⁴ *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*. A Study by Saint Mary's Press of Minnesota, Inc. in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). Saint Mary's Press, September 2017.

⁵ *Instrumentum Laboris*, no. 200.