

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

January 12, 2015

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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% on an average Sunday according to the *New York Times*. In Boston it is even lower, around 12%. Nationwide only 24% of Catholics go to mass on an average Sunday, down from 55% in 1965. (CARA web site)

Our parish is doing a little better than the national average on mass attendance. We see about 30 to 35% of our members on an average Sunday. We have 1100 to 1200 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, Baltimore, Richmond or Annapolis 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 a neutral setting, our parish theater. I hoped that they 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 web site, in the Sunday bulletin, and sent out a blast of e-mails to every e-mail address we had. We probably should have used Twitter and Instagram.

What happened?

Less than ten 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 sang 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 an institution to some extent.

The number one 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 in the

Church, like women's ordination. It is just not to be discussed. He felt that women's opinions were just dismissed by the Church.

He also said there is a complete lack of accountability for what was 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 had written to the Archdiocese and not received any 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 that non-Catholics were not welcome. At the Episcopal Cathedral in Washington, DC, where he had gone at Christmas mass, 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 that 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 PhD candidate in the natural sciences, said she felt that her questions and doubts about the Bible, especially about science, were not answered. She said that no one had really dealt with the "inaccuracies" in the Bible. She said that there were 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 non-denomination 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 that he *does* go church every Sunday, but he does not tell anyone on campus that he is a Catholic. His friends see religion and purely "personal." He also said that he had no Catholic friends at school. However, he liked going to mass because it was the one hour of the week that he did not have to worry about other distractions.

The doctor 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 scientifically oriented. He was very critical of what he thought were inaccuracies in the Church's teaching on birth control. He was 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 surprised and pleased that several said, "They really liked Fr. Daly's homilies." That was gratifying.

Reflecting on their religious education, they said that they really like our retreats and confirmation program but that 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) when she grew 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. She said the homilies in our parish as "relevant" to her life.

One man thought that 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 had become a fundamentalist Christian, now attending our local "mega church." 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 that 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 disagree.

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.