

YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

By Deacon Marcus Fryer, SJ

When we think of the Exodus in Scripture, our minds may conjure an image of the Israelites fleeing from the Egyptians, through the Red Sea, and wandering in the desert for forty years. Their goal was the Promised Land, “flowing with milk and honey,” given to Abraham and his descendants by God. They were seeking a home where the Jewish people could worship their God and could grow in faith and numbers for generations to come.

Recently, CARA, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, released data from their **latest survey** of Catholics in America that showed a much different type of Exodus taking place in the Church. Based upon data from their 2008 survey, their mid-2016 survey showed decreased numbers of weekly Massgoers across the United States, especially in the Millennial-age group. Oft-maligned in popular culture and in the media, Millennials are made up of young people who entered adulthood in the early twenty-first century. While the exact birth years for Millennials are hard to nail down, most social researchers indicate young people born between 1980 and 1995 fall into this generational category. If you take a moment to Google the term Millennial, you will come across a stack of articles discussing how Millennials tend to live at home longer, stay on their parents insurance longer, have a harder time holding down jobs, and rack up at an alarming rate more debt than previous generations (mostly due to education). As a member of, and one who is involved in working with this generation, I am quite sympathetic to the impact our society has had on young people. In my work with high school and college students, I have seen firsthand how changes in our society have affected young adults in our culture. I have also seen how caring, compassionate, service-oriented, and open-minded Millennials can be. The number one lament I hear from parents and grandparents at parishes and retreat centers across the United States is “how can I get my (adult) children to go to Mass?!” Far from simply being an anecdotal cry, the CARA data clearly shows that there is a disconnect between Mass attendance and Millennials. The question, then, becomes, “where do we go from here?”

The CARA data tells us that, of Millennial Catholics, only 14% attend Mass weekly. A massive 66% of Catholic Millennials attend Mass “a few times a year or less often” if you do not include weddings and funerals. That number becomes interesting when you consider that of the Catholic Millennial group, 71% have received the Sacrament of Confirmation. Even more interesting, perhaps, is the fact that 64% of Catholics in the Millennia- age group “believe in God and have no doubt of God’s existence.” What we see, then, is a catechized group of believers who rarely attend Mass.

While I do not know the secret to bringing Millennials back to Mass (if you do, please email me...!), I do want to spend a moment looking at what young Catholic families can do to help raise their children in the faith.

The first step we can take is to emphasize the importance of Mass attendance as a family from an early age. Children develop habits and values directly from their parents. The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us (and Pope Francis frequently reminds us) that the parents are the first and primary educators of their children and that the family is the basic building block of the Church – the “first” Church is the domestic Church. Parents should endeavor to attend Mass regularly, holding true to the Sabbath, as a family unit. Attending the same Mass each week can help children to understand a pattern and rhythm in their life and can help them begin to build community with other children and youth and families at that Mass. Sit in the same pew each week, and, along with your children, get to know the people around you. Being “Mass transients” can lead to a sense of disconnect in young people between the community built in liturgy and in their own faith life. The regularity provided by the Eucharist can help our youth engage fully in so many aspects of Catholic life.

The liturgical calendar has a rhythm and a flow that children can begin to pick up on from the decorations in the church and the tone of the liturgical music. The repetition of the readings and the cycle of the lectionary also add to the tone of the liturgical year for children. Weekly Mass attendance is key to helping our children develop their faith life from an early age.

Secondly, as Catholic families we are called to take advantage of the Sacraments as gifts of God’s grace that aid in our salvation. God gave us the Sacraments, as instituted by Christ, as a way of fully participating in God’s continued work of revelation and salvation. Attendance to the Eucharist in Mass remains paramount among Catholic practices. The other Sacraments also play a vital role in our Catholic life and faith. Children should attend Religious Education at their parish as part of their preparation for the Sacraments and should then be encouraged to partake in the Sacraments regularly as they grow in maturity.

Parents, too, should strive to be models of the Sacramental life, receiving frequent Reconciliation. Bring your children with you when you go to confession (...you can leave them outside of the confessional!). I remember being a young child and being terrified of going to confession. To this day my high school confirmation students still tell me that the thought of going to confession scares them to no end (even though they always say they are glad that they went!).

How do we help our children when they are scared of or intimidated by other things in life? We explain, we encourage, and we model. The Sacraments must be handled the same way. Perhaps more important than the simple act of building the habit of taking advantage of the Sacraments, we acknowledge as Catholic faithful that the Sacraments give us the grace and strength to live out our faith. Let’s make sure that our children receive as much of that grace and strength as we can!

Finally, we return to the idea of the domestic Church. We have to make sure that we model at home the life of faith. Church and faith cannot simply be something that happens on the weekends when we feel like getting up, packing everyone into the car, and driving to Mass. At home we should strive

to start our meals with prayers and we should encourage our children to lead these prayers. We can even decorate our homes in simple ways to match the liturgical calendar. No one questions putting up Christmas decorations, but what if we use just one table or counter in our home to set up similar displays or decorations for Lent or Easter? Do we light candles on an Advent Wreath in the weeks leading up to the Birth of Christ?

The family can participate in social ministries at the parish as well. Consider picking one event a month at your parish to go as a family to do service for the community. The goal, here, remains to help our children and young people to develop a full sense of their faith, fully integrating what we believe with what we live.

Many of the articles about young people and the Church advocate setting off alarms and issuing cries about the sky falling. We have to remember that the Holy Spirit is alive and well and working in the life of the Church and in the lives of the faithful. We have been redeemed by Christ and God desires a personal relationship with each one of us. As parents, grandparents, and Catholics in the pews, we must remember to thank God each day for the gift that young people are and accept that we have a responsibility to help them grow into faithful, loving Catholics!

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