Opinion
News
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March 16, 2018
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If the recent conference at the University of Notre Dame — where speakers postulated reasons for young people's disassociation from the Catholic Church — represents the approach going into the upcoming Synod of Bishops on young people, we would beg church officials to postpone the gathering.

What we heard was a familiar litany, placing blame for missing young people on:

- Technology — specifically youths' obsession with smartphones — which supposedly robs them of the contemplative mind and makes them "suckers for irrelevancy."
- An aversion to "orthodoxy," a term the user brandished with the certainty that his strain of orthodoxy is the immutable version of the truth.
- The "dumbing down of our faith."
- The pervasiveness of pornography and relativism, of course.
- And a new danger — the "bland toleration" of diversity, a curious addition.

According to this analysis, it is the young people, not the church, who are in crisis. By this analysis, the very institution that young people find so wanting that they have nothing to do with it nonetheless knows all of the questions and has all of the answers. This analysis imagines a "kairos moment" when scales fall from young eyes that no longer gaze at screens nor at pervasive porn as they become aware of their deficiencies and their state of crisis.

What a self-satisfying assessment. And what a relief. It isn't that healthy young people might be repulsed by the way that church leaders mishandled the sex abuse crisis for decades. Nor is it the money scandals or callousness toward gay and lesbian Catholics or the bishop-driven one-issue politics that has reduced religion and faith to a bumper sticker in the culture wars.

No, they say, the problem lies with young people who have acquired culturally influenced defects.

The cultural critique has value, of course, and the disaffection of young people from all manner of institutional involvement — from the local symphony orchestra to the Rotary Club — needs continued examination to figure out how institutions can be relevant to young people.

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While dwindling numbers of Catholics are no doubt due to some extent to these social forces, there is much more to consider in the case of the church. Before

becoming too convinced that the reason for the disaffection lies with everything and everyone else, church leaders need to seriously examine how their own shortcomings and failures have contributed to young people leaving the church.

It is reasonable to understand that teens and young adults, living in a civil culture that increasingly accepts their LGBT friends and family members, find unacceptable the intolerance and outright discrimination of some Catholic officials and organizations.

It is understandable that a young person would rather not be part of an institution that preaches God's mercy but shows little mercy toward divorced and remarried parents.

Young people, especially young women, who know how their mothers and grandmothers struggled to gain equality in the wider culture, don't care to become involved in an institution where women are marginalized. What can they think of an institution that bars women from its most important deliberative bodies while women hold the vast majority of ministry positions in parishes and dioceses?

Is it surprising that young women might avoid an institution where only men are ordained to preside over the community's most profound moments?

Isn't it also reasonable, speaking of vocations to the priesthood, that parents might hesitate to encourage their sons to join a clerical culture that has been depleted not only in numbers, but also in credibility and moral standing?

> Fear no longer works to fill the pews or keep people compliant. The people of God are looking for inspiration.
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Could it be that only the tiniest representation of young people will be attracted to parishes and dioceses dominated by legalists and doctrinal "rigorists"?

Fear no longer works to fill the pews or keep people compliant. The people of God are looking for inspiration. The young — all of us really — are looking for authenticity. Examples of people who walk the faith and live the heart of the Gospel are more convincing than hours of apologetics and glitzy presentations on up-to-

date delivery platforms.

Unless church leaders at the highest levels thoroughly examine how our community became so distorted — corrupt like a white sepulcher — a synod about attracting younger members will ultimately prove a waste of time and effort.

Perhaps the breathless pursuit of young people in its embarrassing obviousness should be set aside to give church leaders time for deep reflection on what it means to be authentically humble. Replace fanciful answers to questions few are asking with a simple sign, containing one line, in each bishop's office: "You may be the problem."

A version of this story appeared in the **March 23-April 5, 2018** print issue.