News



Franciscan Sr. Katarina Schuth addresses the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests on challenges of evangelizing young Catholics June 25 at the Marriott Pyramid North in Albuquerque, New Mexico. (Courtesy AUSCP/Paul Leingang)



by Dan Morris-Young

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A leading expert on pastoral theology has underscored that the Catholic Church must quickly and effectively engage young Catholics through dialogue, awareness, listening, respect, humility, patience and creativity — or its future looks dim.

In the June 25 opening presentation at the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests' annual assembly held June 25-28* in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Franciscan Sr. Katarina Schuth did not minimize challenges in reaching millennial Catholics, noting that:

- One third of them "are anti-church";
- Nearly 9 in 10 reject a male-only priesthood;
- On most sexual and gender issues, only seven percent agree with church teaching;
- Only 27 percent regard church authority as important.

To make the quest even more daunting, Schuth, professor emerita at The St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she was the endowed chair for social and scientific study of religion, told the more than 200 participants gathered here that millennial Catholics are made up of multiple groups which, in turn, have sub-groups.

A graphic in Schuth's presentation cautioned, "Do not lump together everyone under age 50 as 'our younger members.' They are not alike — and do not necessarily see things the same way. All members of a given generation are not clones of each other. Latino, Asian American or African American millennials and Gen Xers will differ from their white, middle-class counterparts and among each other."

In conversation with NCR, she called specific attention to the growing Latino Catholic population that is projected to comprise half of the U.S. Catholic population in the near future.

It is dangerous, however, she said, to think of millennials of Hispanic/Latino descent as homogenous.

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"There are enormous variations" among Latinos, she said, including country of origin, time residing in the U.S., economic and educational backgrounds. For example, she said, Latinos whose families "have lived generations" in the U.S. can have significantly different views than those who have recently immigrated.

That said, she told participants there are some generalizations that are predominant to the spectrum of millennials:

- Even if they do not always connect volunteer service to religion or spirituality, many have "a strong desire to work for the common good" with more than two thirds volunteering "regularly";
- They tend to be "experientially oriented" and many "consider personal, subjective experience to be the basis for authentic religious truth";
- They are prone to be materialistically motivated, "career driven," "ambitious" and focused on "immediate external satisfaction" despite looking to the church and parishes to "create an environment of frugality" and transparency.

Fundamental to engaging young Catholics for the longer term, she said, is sincere listening to "their concerns and ideas" and genuinely incorporating them into decision-making and leadership.

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Tools and approaches, she added, can include "forums, surveys and meetings to discover the needs of young adults, those both in the church and those not practicing."

Her checklist advocated letting millennials "know you believe in them and encourage them to go for their dreams" and "go out of the way to thank people for giving so much to the church when they do."

Schuth, author of several books, including *Seminary Formation: Recent History, Current Circumstances, New Directions*, indicated to NCR that she was probably preaching to the choir, as AUSCP members are by-in-large "seasoned pastors" who "really know what people need and want."

She still urged the audience of mostly senior, Anglo priests to keep in mind that millennials view church history and devotional practices with a significantly different "cultural mindset" than they.

"The Second Vatican Council is as distant [to millennials] as the Council of Trent," she said, and millennials offer "new interpretations" of devotional practices like praying the rosary or practicing eucharistic adoration.

Millennials, she explained in her presentation, "do not and cannot look at the church, the Mass, the hierarchy, the sacraments, devotions and other aspects of Catholicism with the same cultural mindset of older Catholics."

"Thus, what older generations may consider 'retro' Catholic practices such as the rosary, eucharistic adoration, Gregorian chant or religious habits, [these] may be attractive to young Catholics," Schuth said.

Along the same lines, she added, "different generations will process your message differently."

Millennials, for example, "are not used to waiting. A 12-hour delay in responding to an email is an eternity."

"An attractive, image-filled, interactive — and frequently updated — web page is far more effective than any printed material," she said. "Consider the possibilities of blogs and podcasts, too."

Franciscan Sr. Katarina Schuth talks to NCR about meeting younger people where they are.

Schuth told NCR she was supportive of the AUSCP's January statement on priestly formation, "Preparing the Sixth Edition of the Program of Priestly Formation: Five Overriding Concerns."

Schuth lauded the priest organization's call for making the teaching of Vatican II the bedrock of the Program of Priestly Formation for U.S. seminaries currently under review by the U.S. bishops' Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations.

She also supports the AUSCP statement's call for enhanced psychosexual development and celibacy formation for seminarians, as well as greater parish-based pastoral experience and training.

On the second and third day of the assembly, AUSCP participants are scheduled to discuss more than a dozen resolutions and goals for the coming year. Topics include the status of women in the church, gun control and non-violence, promoting

dialogue over debate, ongoing concern with liturgical text translations, and petitioning the U.S. bishops to seek Vatican permission to consider ordaining married men in light of an increasing U.S. priest shortage.

San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy was to deliver a June 26 morning keynote address, "Pastoral Theology for a Post-Modern World."

Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr, an internationally known speaker and author on spirituality, was scheduled to make a 7 p.m. presentation on June 26, "Action and Contemplation: Toward Discipleship in a Secular Age," and direct attendees in a June 27 retreat from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Founded in 2011 and based in Tiffin, Ohio, the AUSCP has about 1,200 priest members in addition to about 120 enrolled supporters.

* *The assembly dates in this story have been corrected.*

[Dan Morris-Young is NCR's West Coast correspondent. His email is dmyoung@ncronline.org.]