Opinion



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by Christian Mocek

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September 6, 2018

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In his essay, "A Prayer for You and Yours," Brian Doyle describes, "two Catholic Churches, one a noun and the other a verb; one a corporation and the other a wild idea held in the hearts of millions of people who are utterly disinterested in authority and power and rules and regulations, and very interested indeed in finding ways to walk through the bruises of life with grace and humility."

Brian Doyle, arguably one of the greatest Catholic writers of our time, was a theologian of everyday life who wrote essays about finding the grace of God — in the color of church folding chairs, encounters at pick-up basketball games, or in parenting his children. He had an unusual yet wise and insightful way of looking at life. And I don't know with certainty, but I imagine if he were here today to offer his input on what we can do to bring young adults back to the church, he would remind us all that theirs is a generation utterly disinterested in authority, power, rules and regulations but one that is still holding onto the wild idea of a God.

Studies on the faith practices of millennials by St. Mary's Press and Pew Research say that, too, of course, but less poetically. The "nones," those who claim no affiliation with religion, are unbelievers in a church that hides sexual abuse, downplays sexual assault, and shuns members because of their sexuality. They are unbelievers in the corporation side, as Brian Doyle termed. They do not believe in a church that is a sedentary, out-of-touch, and immovable fortress guarded by men in brightly colored dresses and pointy hats.

I know this church well, as we all do. That church is a church of sharply worded press releases — or not sharply worded enough, of uninspiring political actions like the fortnight for freedom, and of shallow apologies for grave breaches of trust. It's a church of secretive decision-making in the marbled halls of the Vatican, or the diocesan chancery office, or even the parish office. Sadly, it's also a church that fights tooth and nail to keep victims of sexual abuse out of courtrooms and who refuses to pay paltry retribution for a lifetime of suffering caused by their lack of moral courage.

Yes, it is well documented that the "nones" and in fact, many Catholics, are unbelievers in that church. John Vitek, coauthor of *Going, Going, Gone! The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*, explains this well in his article for the National Catholic Reporter titled, "Better understanding, not apologetics, will best serve 'nones'."

But could they be believers in the other church? The church that is a wild idea in which we find a way to walk together through life's bruises with grace and humility?

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That church isn't found first in the offices of our hierarchy, in their press releases, or in their morally hollow public voice. It certainly isn't found first in documents published by Vatican synods, such as whatever is going to come from the Vatican synod on young people in October.

Indeed, it is found first in the hearts of the faithful — inspired by the way the faithful have lived this wild idea for generations.

It's in the testimony of everyday men and women trying their best to be God's hands and feet. It's in the community we create when gathered around the tables of our homes, sharing our brokenness and struggle about trusting in God despite the betrayal of our shepherds. The great irony of all the cover-ups and lies is that they were an attempt to not scandalize the church, when in truth it left it rotted at its core, now an embarrassingly disfigured former image of itself.

But the faithful — the ones who've always held that wild idea — are the ones who will have to forge a new path. The corporation cannot clean up its own mess; it's we who will have to do it for them, as we have always done. It's the ones who hold fast to the wild idea that community founded in faith can transform the world that will transform the scarlet-guarded fortress.

It's this wild idea, the one about grace, forgiveness, mercy, and humility lived out on the margins that will enliven God in the hearts of those who no longer believe they can find it in the place where it should always be found. I'm looking forward to what the synod on young people will promulgate from the halls of Rome. But I've always believed more in what the pew-sitting faithful can promulgate from their own hearts.

Somewhere beyond the assaults, cover-ups, press-releases, synods, and unwieldy theological documents, God lives and breathes in the magisterium in as much as they work to allow God to live and breathe in them. But I believe God is more readily present on the road to Emmaus — where he walks beside those walking away from the Eternal City and offers them a way to understand the burning desires in their hearts.

It may seem counterintuitive, but in this time of great uncertainty within the church, it may be best to journey *to* Emmaus. For far from the city on the hill and the marbled halls of Vatican splendor are the roads on which "nones" are walking. We should walk there, too, and join them on the journey. We should tell them about the Jesus we know and of the wild idea of finding ways to walk through the bruises of life with grace and humility together.

In his essay, "The door's always open. That's sort of the point of a church, isn't it?" Brian Doyle wrote that a "Church must be a sanctuary, or it's just another corporation." The sanctuary, it seems, is no longer in the grand churches of our bishops. It's in the invitation to come and discover God and in the wild idea that we can do this thing called life together — in truth, that's where it's always been.

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