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The challenge Christian Millennials offer has joys and risks

Bill Tammeus | Mar. 24, 2010 A small c catholic

My inner John Calvin [1] (sometimes I have to arm wrestle him into quietude) occasionally whispers this reminder to me: Faith is not about having all the answers. Rather, it?s about learning to live confidently with unresolved questions.

That?s the healthiest place to locate oneself on the theological spectrum because it allows -- indeed, encourages -- a lively conversation that can deepen one?s commitment to the faith community that provides a safe space in which asking hard questions is a normal way of proceeding.

Thus, I was almost envious of the Catholic church when I read the results [2] of a recent Knights of Columbus/Marist Poll.

It turns out, according to the poll, that Catholic Millennials -- those between 18 and 29 -- are willing to disagree with church leaders, including the pope, in various ways, and yet two-thirds of them (a huge landslide in any political election) say they want to learn more about their faith.

Church members and leaders who are terrified of change and who think they have locked in all answers for eternity may be profoundly distressed by the news that members of the younger generation often take issue with church teachings. But I see it as a sign of health. I wish, in fact, that all Protestant branches, especially ones that identify themselves as fundamentalist or conservative, would welcome such questioners in their ranks rather than discouraging them and in some cases declaring them apostate.

I?m not suggesting that there aren?t core teachings the church should defend and continue to explain to each new generation. In fact, if it didn?t do that it wouldn?t be the church. But I am suggesting that your Catholic church and my Presbyterian denomination both must understand a lesson rising from the Emergent Church Movement [3], which Tom Roberts of *NCR* has been writing about for some time now.

Tony Jones, author of *The New Christians*, puts that lesson this way: ?Emergents believe that truth, like God, cannot be definitively articulated by finite human beings.? So talking about truth, he suggests, requires the Benedictine virtue of humility.

Supreme Knight Carl Anderson was right to say that ?there is much good news for the church in this (KofC/Marist) survey,? though perhaps he had in mind results that show 82 percent of Catholic Millennials believe commitment to marriage is under-valued and not the results that found exactly that same percent of Catholic Millennials see morals as ?relative.?

As religion columnist Terry Mattingly noted, the latter result means that four out of five Catholic Millennials agree with this statement: ?Morals are relative; there is no definite right and wrong for everybody.?

As I say, this might be seen as evidence that a big segment of Catholics is in deep moral trouble and utterly out of sync with the late Pope John Paul II?s 1993 encyclical, Veritatis Splendor [4], in which he wrote that there

are ?universal and unchanging moral norms.?

But how much better to view the results as an opportunity to gather as a community of faith and engage in a probing and deep conversation about what Catholic Millennials mean by ?relative? and what the late pope meant -- and by implication, the church itself might mean -- by ?unchanging.?

What a wonderful opportunity for the church to be open to hearing its younger generation and for that generation to be open to hearing the teachings and traditions of their church.

If this were happening in my Protestant church, the goal would not be to beat the kids into theological submission, nor would it be for the kids to beat the church into abandoning its historic confessions of faith. Rather, the idea would be to know and to be known, to listen, to speak from the heart, to continue the kinds of conversations that true families have.

These poll results are, in effect, an invitation to a family Thanksgiving meal -- with all the joys and risks that such meals imply.

[**Editor's Note:** Tammeus' next column will be posted April 7. We can let you know when it is posted, if you sign up for **an e-mail alert** [5].]

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