

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 16, 2014 at 11:05am

Young adult Catholics find a new kind of communion in D.C.

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

Studies and statistics suggest that young, progressive Catholics have lost interest in the church. But one visit to a monthly potluck of young adult Catholics in Washington, D.C., may leave you questioning that theory.

Born out of the 2012 Call to Action national conference, the idea for the gathering was created when Kate Conmy, Margaret Johnson and Katie Jones, three D.C.-area members of CTA's 20/30 young adult communities, began to dream up new ways to build community among young adult Catholics.

"We bonded over our shared love of the Enneagram and other progressive Catholic nerdiness," says Johnson, a pastoral associate for social justice ministry at Holy Trinity, a Jesuit parish in Georgetown. Over the course of the weekend, the team envisioned "two kinds of gatherings, one for faith-sharing and one for low-key social time."

For the faith-sharing component, they developed a centering prayer group that would meet weekly in one of their homes. In each session, they would share their spiritual journey, read selections from spiritual writings, sit in silence for 20 minutes, and conclude with short reflections and prayer.

The larger, social meeting would take place once a month at different homes in D.C. It would be a potluck dinner with free-flowing, informal conversation. Eventually, they would call it Guerrilla Communion.

"The abiding principle for Guerrilla Communion is that progressive Catholics need a space to let our whole, weird selves hang out," says Jones, a coordinator for the Loretto Volunteers. "Not to do anything in particular, just to be. It's a simple ministry."

Though the word "guerrilla" may have militant roots, the organizers use the term in a way similar to "guerrilla filmmaking": a mobile, innovative and decidedly low-budget way of creating something new.

The name Guerrilla Communion initially sprang from co-organizer Conmy's mind last spring, when the Defense of Marriage Act and Proposition 8 were being argued in the Supreme Court. Johnson was working on a recipe for rainbow bread to bake for friends should the justices decide to strike down both laws. Seeing a photo of the bread on Facebook, Conmy immediately called it "guerrilla Communion."

The phrase caught on with the group and took on new meaning when it was applied to the monthly potluck. "It evokes sharing faith, breaking bread, coming together in a haphazard way," says Conmy, who is assistant director at the Women's Ordination Conference.

"We're not planning major actions; this isn't a clandestine organization," Johnson laughs. "We invite every young adult we know in D.C. who is remotely Catholic."

"The formlessness of Guerrilla Communion is something I really love," Conmy says. "For me, it is comforting to be in a room of people who work for or are involved with faith-based organizations. I suppose it is just simple community-building that we try to make as inviting, recurring and noncommittal as possible."

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One reason Guerilla Communion works so well in D.C. is because the town is dense with justice-oriented Catholic groups, from larger organizations like Pax Christi and NETWORK to long-standing grassroots groups like WATER and the Assisi Community. Yet a large presence of progressive Catholics doesn't necessarily ensure they will create community together.

"Even in D.C., a lot of progressive communities work in silos," Conmy says. "At Guerrilla Communion, people come together for intentional networking and unlikely networking. It's a way to encourage cross-pollination."

The event may have emerged out of a Call to Action meeting, but it has grown to attract a spectrum of young adult Catholics. Like its three organizers, most Guerilla Communion attendees work for or associate with justice-oriented Catholic organizations, including Catholics United, the Franciscan Action Network, DignityUSA and Catholics for Choice.

Though the majority of folks in the room would fall in the "progressive Catholic" category, the diversity of organizations with which they affiliate is evidence that not everyone in the room is in perfect agreement about church or social issues. One of the beauties of the gathering is that despite their organizations' differing stances, folks feel like they can find communion with one another without fear of backlash or controversy.

"We are here as individual people, not as representatives of our organizations," said Ashley Wilson, a staff member at NETWORK and the host of the December event. "We realize that a gathering like this could never take place at one of our offices during regular working hours."

Though there is no topic or formal conversation at Guerrilla Communion, each potluck starts with attendees introducing themselves and answering a playful icebreaker question. At a recent gathering, attendees were asked, "If you got a religious tattoo, what would it be and where would you get it?"

Given the number of responses that involved either the Pedro Arrupe prayer or Ignatius Loyola, it was clear there was a significant presence of Former Jesuit Volunteers in the room. They got some healthy competition for a core group of Loretto Volunteers, as well as other attendees who chose Scripture verses and cherished images from area Catholic churches.

Since the first Guerrilla Communion in April of last year, the event has drawn between 15 and 50 people, and every week a core group of five to 10 people continue to meet for centering prayer.

"I experience the combination of social potlucks and weekly prayer as deeply related," Jones reflects. "Together, it's church for me right now."

For some young Catholics like Lauren Carpenter, the event has become such a lifeline that they'll drive more than an hour from places like Baltimore to be a part of the communion. In addition to the fun, food and relaxation it offers, Carpenter says Guerilla Communion makes the journey toward church justice less lonely.

"Getting a chance to interact with so many other progressive Catholics who are engaged in their faith makes me feel that there is indeed a place for me in this church," Carpenter says. "With so many passionate people working for justice and church reform in different ways, we might actually have a chance."

Like Carpenter, Becky Schwantes-An makes the long drive from Baltimore for the chance "to have honest conversations with intelligent, compassionate people who are working for a better world and church in their personal and professional lives."

A new mom, Schwantes-An says it's also an opportunity to take a break from baby and parenting talk and to focus on another passion in her life: justice in the church and society.

"Guerilla Communion reminds me of what I love about Catholicism," she says, "and it gives me great hope for my generation as we take on leadership roles and collaborate with one another."

Hope is one of the gifts Guerrilla Communion also gives Martin Witchger. A gay man, Witchger says though he feels the institutional church tries to push him out, the "people in Guerrilla Communion that give me hope for the Catholic church and keep me from leaving the church."

Those who attend Guerrilla Communion may have differing experiences and approaches to the church, but they all share a desire for a deeper communion with one another.

Many young adults say the reason they don't attend church is because they feel the rituals are not relevant to them. Though relaxed and unstructured, Guerrilla Communion offers these young adults the intimacy, presence and self-giving that Catholics celebrate in the Eucharist. The sacraments of the church make more sense to them when they are invited to enjoy the sacraments of conversation, listening and breaking

bread in their ordinary lives.

"Sharing our joys and our brokenness, sharing a meal, and discussing our faith helps me still feel part of the church." Witchger says. "It is one of the best experiences of church that I've had in a long time."

For more information about Guerrilla Communion or for ideas about starting your own event, contact guerrillacommunion@gmail.com.

[Jamie L. Manson is *NCR* books editor. She received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA). Her email address is jmanson@ncronline.org.]

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