

Growing up Millennial: Are young people too cool for religion?

Lauren Janniello wants everything from her Catholic faith.

The rising senior at Loyola University Maryland grew up in what she described as a “conservative” parish in Montgomery County, one which placed a strong emphasis on the sacraments.

At Loyola, her eyes were opened to the many social outreaches of the church. Inspired, she sought opportunities for international service trips, to the dismay of some friends and family members, who insisted that her Catholicism had to fit in a specific box.

“In the Gospel, we get this imagery of Christ having a banquet and he’s inviting us to the table,” Janniello said. “I see the traditional spirituality as he’s offering us the meat and the potatoes of the meal.

“But, with the social justice aspect, he’s offering us the vegetables and that nourishment. Some people are vegetarians and only want the social justice aspect. My grandparents more want the meat and potatoes. I see that Christ is offering us the whole banquet. Why wouldn’t I eat all of it if he’s offering it to me?”

Janniello is typical of the Millennial Generation, Americans born between 1981 and 2000, who are contemplating their role in religion and the part it will play in their lives.

This is the fourth and final installment of a Catholic Review series examining Millennials.

In mid-August, an Archdiocese of Baltimore contingent will travel to Madrid for World Youth Day. Pope Benedict XVI, the 265th head of the Roman Catholic Church, will lead a gathering of more than 1 million Catholics.

While a high ratio will be Americans, the state of religiosity among Millennials is definitely in question.

A Stark numbers

Seventy-two percent of young people interviewed for a 2010 LifeWay Christian Resources study said they were more spiritual than religious.

“Being religious isn’t showing up to Mass on Sundays or not eating meat on Fridays during Lent,” said Loyola rising junior Tom Arning. “It’s actually feeling the meaning of doing all those things.”

The LifeWay study found that about two-thirds of young people 18 to 29 rarely prayed, attended houses of worship or read the holy Bible.

“I view the world, as a fairly committed Catholic, as you can do great things for yourself,” Arning said. “People all over the world have the ability to do incredible things, but the world has corrupting influences. I think it’s part of the human challenge to stay above corrupting influences and kind of push yourself forward.”

According to a 2010 Pew Research Center survey of people 18 to 29, about 25 percent list their religion as “none.” Only 15 percent said living a “very religious life” is one of their most important goals.

About 22 percent of Millennials are Catholic, two percent below the national overall number for the faith. About a third attend Mass regularly.

“I should go to church more and I know that,” said Kathryn Franke, a rising junior at

Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg. "I definitely believe in God and try to live my life off those ideals. I wouldn't say I'm the type to go to church every day."

She paused for a second.

"I'm going to work on that," she said.

A major challenge

Recent Loyola graduate Brendan Stack, a cradle Catholic now active in the faith and campus ministry, admits rejecting the faith at age 14.

"One day, after church, I was just like, 'This sucks, I don't want anything to do with it,' " Stack remembered. "I found it cult-like and not to my liking. Everything I had done to that point was in the Catholic Church so it was hard to progress in society. I went to church occasionally. I was still searching."

Catholic leaders know they have their work cut out for them.

"It is a matter of inclusion," said Scott Miller, director of the Division of Youth and Young Adult Ministry for the archdiocese. "When young people 'do church,' we fail if they are only experiencing faith with their peers. We have to invite young people to share in the 'grown-ups' table' of our faith community, of our worship, of our living out the mission of the church."

Lauren Aroyo, youth minister of St. Joseph Parish in Fullerton, believes parents are a potential roadblock.

"If the parents do not feel that youth ministry and catechesis is important, then the teens cannot even get through the door," said Aroyo. "We have no chance to love them if they don't have a ride to the church or a family who sacrifices to get them there."

St. Joseph parishioner and Mercy High School student Emily Schreiber, 16, said seeing Aroyo's passionate witness during a confirmation retreat made her faith more alive.

"I don't want it to be a piece of my life," she said. "I want to put it in all parts."

Making their own rules

Pope Benedict believes the church provided inadequate catechesis instruction during the second half of the 20th century.

The church will release "YOUCAT: Youth Catechism of The Catholic Church," during World Youth Day in hopes of reversing course.

On the back cover, the pope writes: "You need to be more deeply rooted in the faith than the generation of your parents so that you can engage the challenges and temptations of this time with strength and determination."

The church has a daunting task there.

"In terms of Catholicism, I tend not to get bogged down in the rules," Stack said. "There are some things I 100 percent believe in, like transubstantiation. There are other issues I have my personal opinions on, like gay marriage. Those aren't the opinions of the Catholic Church. That doesn't mean I'm going to abandon my faith altogether."

Several studies show more than half of Millennials believe that homosexuals should have the right to marry.

During the spring general assembly of U.S. bishops in Bellevue, Wash., Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien expressed concern that the sanctity of marriage is not cherished.

“It seems like almost overnight we’ve lost the young adult community on this, including Catholics,” Archbishop O’Brien said.

There are also contradictory beliefs among young people when it comes to abortion. According to a recent Brookings Institution study, about 70 percent of young people said they are pro-choice, but 65 percent describe themselves as being pro-life.

The faith center

Aroyo, the Fullerton parish youth minister, uses a Eucharist-centered approach in her ministry.

Eucharistic adoration has become popular in parishes across the country in recent years, after a fall off in the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s. Aroyo said teens arrive in droves because they are attracted to the real presence of Jesus, praise and worship music and Scripture readings.

She admits that when she first arrived at St. Joseph, some thought she was “crazy.”

“Then God did the rest of the work,” she said. “Once we begin there is nothing else I can do but intercede and call upon the Holy Spirit.”

Schreiber said “Christ became real for me,” after adoration at St. Joseph.

“I think to get the full experience of faith, you have to have religion there,” Schreiber said. “Religion is what backs you up.”

Are there enough Emily Schreibers in the world to make the Catholic faith thrive in the 21st century?

For more on this series visit CatholicReview.org/Millennials and CatholicReview.org/palmerblog.