

In praise of millennials

One of the most common comments I heard about the crowd of storm trooper wannabes marching with backyard tiki torches and wooden shields through the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, was how many young people were among them.

It revealed a certain cultural bias: The assumption that the only folks who dress up and scare people are bitter, middle-aged white guys with drawls.

But young people do stupid things too. I know. I lived through the '60s. We had our haircuts, or lack thereof. We had our own language and music. We raged against the war, we questioned authority, we thought drugs made us smarter. We had our earnest revolutionaries and our violent activists, crypto-Marxists and the Weather Underground.

Finally, before the horrified gaze of our parents' generation, all the anger and self-righteousness devolved into the Symbionese Liberation Army, the lethally dimwitted revolutionaries who seduced a newspaper heiress's daughter and robbed banks.

It's easy to be stupid when you're young, though it is never an excuse for hatred and violence.

Before we jump to any generational conclusions, however, I want to confess that I'm a big fan of millennials, despite who showed up in Charlottesville. I'll admit my pro-millennial bias is homegrown: I've fathered four of them. And I'm particularly proud right now because my oldest daughter just came home following a year of service in Ecuador.

After graduating from college, she volunteered for a program called Rostro de Cristo (The Face of Christ). Founded by Father Jim Ronan, a Boston priest, in 1988, Rostro (as its volunteers call it) was Pope Francis before Pope Francis.

It is all about his themes of encounter and accompaniment. A dozen or so volunteers each year live with the poor, like the poor, in the shantytowns surrounding the port city of Guayaquil.

Located near the equator, it is stifling hot in the summer season and wet during the rainy season. Chickens make their way across dusty roads that turn thick with mud as soon as it rains. The neighborhoods are often illegal, teeming with migrants from the countryside who squat where they can and find a million creative ways to eke out a subsistence living.

The volunteers work in day cares and after-school programs and even a house for those suffering from Hansen's disease (formerly known as leprosy). But the real reason to be there is simply to be with: "Your principal role is to live the mission as individuals and communities in Ecuador," the volunteers are told, "serving, praying and building relationships with our neighbors and each other."

So they spend time with neighborhood families, sharing their joys and sorrows, their feasts and feast days, slowly learning about generosity and hospitality from people we too easily assume have nothing.

For a young middle-class Catholic woman who grew up in the white suburbs of the Midwest, Ecuador could not have been more different. My daughter and her fellow Rostro volunteers embraced the opportunity, and they allowed it to change them.

These are the millennials that I'm proud of. Those who study or work overseas, or volunteer to serve others in this country, get to know not just the people who look and act and believe like them, but also those who do not. They are receiving an invaluable perspective both on the world outside and the country they grew up in.

These millennials understand that despite all the talk of border walls and trade wars, this world is growing smaller and more interrelated with each passing day.

These are the members of their generation who "will not be replaced," and they are a blessing for us all.

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