

The Millennial Generation, Postmodernism & the Changing Face of Catholic Youth Ministry

By Frank Mercadante



Introduction

In the 2006 motion picture, *The Invasion*, Nicole Kidman discloses the context of the film while observing a “typical day” in Washington, DC. She scans the rushing crowds, of what on the surface seems a routine morning. But, she senses the veneer exterior conceals something suspicious. She then frames the film’s plot by saying, “Something’s happening. I don’t know what it is, but I can feel it.” She then turns to her companion and asks, “Have you noticed anything?”

Let’s frame this journal article with the same introduction and question: “Something’s happening. I don’t know what it is, but I can feel it. Have you noticed anything?”

Although our daily youth ministry affairs chime with a cord of familiarity, not far below the surface something has distinctly changed in the last several years. We can’t always name it or articulate it profoundly, but we can feel it.

The world has changed. Teens have changed. Their responses to our past programs have changed. However, most of our parishes have not changed.

The late management theorist, Peter Drucker, put it this way: “Every few hundred years in Western history, there occurs a sharp transformation... within a few short decades, society rearranges itself – its worldview; its basic values; its social and political structure; its arts; its key institutions... Fifty years later, there is a new world and the people born then cannot even imagine the world in which their grandparents lived and into which their own parents were born. We are currently living through just such a transformation.”¹

Drucker was describing the paradigmatic cultural shift from modernity to post-modernity. As a result of the influence of postmodernity, people – especially young people, see and understand the world differently. If this transition isn’t

epochal enough, add the generational passage from Gen X to the Millennials. Today's youth are distinctly different from their Gen X predecessors.

The following article examines some of the more significant changes in the youth of today. We will consider the general characteristics of the Millennial Generation and some of the distinctions of postmodern thinking. We will also look at some of implications of these changes in light of our common youth ministry assumptions, methodologies, and approaches.

The Millennial Generation

Introduction

The Millennial Generation is the youngest and largest generation in the U.S. They were born from 1982 to 2002, and are 80 million strong, eclipsing the size of the Baby Boomers (born 1943 to 1960). When factoring in immigration, some experts estimate their size will reach 100 million. They are also the most ethnically diverse generation in American history.

They are also known as Gen Y (Y comes after X), the Net Generation, the Digital Generation (growing up as Internet and digital natives), or the Echo Boomers (because of the growing birth rate to Boomer mothers). But, according to several surveys, they overwhelmingly prefer the title 'Millennials'. The title was coined in 1988 as they entered kindergarten, anticipating their high school graduation date of 2000.

General Profile of the Millennial Generation

The Millennial Generation heralds an impressive array of descriptive titles such as the "Good News Generation," the "Sunshine Generation," and the "Next Great Generation." As a whole, they seem defiant to the ageless decree on youth: "The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders... are now tyrants. They contradict their parents, ... and tyrannize their teachers." (Attributed to Socrates, 5th century B.C. and echoed in some form by every adult generation since!)

The "Good News" title is not without warrant. Ninety percent describe themselves as "happy," "positive," and "confident." They are more prone to follow the rules, engage in volunteer service, and work together for the good of others. Over ninety percent say they "feel close" and "trust" their parents. Furthermore, they are the most highly educated generation in U.S. history. Seventy-three percent want to go to college after high school. The number of

Millennials who have taken and passed Advanced Placement tests has doubled in the past decade. Teens aren't hiding their success in the classroom. Eighty percent say, "It's cool to be smart."

That's not all; many negative behaviors of past teenage generations have declined with the Millennials. Suicides, abortions, teen pregnancies, and violent crimes are down. Tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drug use are also at lower rates. Fatal shootings in high schools, teens carrying weapons to school, and youths engaging in a physical fight have all declined with this generation.²

We cannot be so naive to think that every Millennial Generation teen is on the road to sainthood. There are certainly significant numbers of teens engaging in negative behaviors. There are young people in the margins of our society, such as immigrant youth, those suffering in poverty, and families with various issues who certainly remain at risk. Overall, however, their disposition as an emerging generation is quite encouraging.

Their positive traits should come as no mystery. The Millennials arrived during a time when America was quite positive about children. The "No Children Allowed" warnings surrendered to the minivan alerts of "Baby on Board." The political winds shifted to "kinderpolitics" policies, where the motto rang, "If it's good for children – then it's good for America!" Many educational and social initiatives were launched in order to reverse some of the negative trends that besieged the youth of previous generations. Churches got on board by hiring youth ministers and developing youth ministries. Schools developed policies that ensured that every student had equal access to an education. The Millennials enjoyed unprecedented focus, protection, and positive opportunities.

While the Gen X (born 1961 to 1981) youth were branded the "latch-key" kids, the parents of Millennials merited the title of "helicopter parents." Within a single generation, kids morphed from the reputation of raising themselves to being mega-managed by ever-hovering parents. Generational researcher and author William Strauss adds that if you think Boomer parents are protective, Gen X parents take it to a new level. He calls them "Stealth fighter parents." While "copter parents" hover and drop in when necessary, "stealth fighters" "move with stunning swiftness and know how to use technology when the need arises."³ Behind many Millennial students and athletes stand highly invested parents. For many teachers and coaches, their most difficult challenges are no longer the children, but their entangled parents. As Millennials entered college, universities responded to this new breed of parent by creating new departments that address parental relations and concerns.

Core Characteristics of the Millennial Teen

Millennials grew up in a different time and evolved into something very different from their Generation X predecessors. Yet, many of the current Catholic youth ministry practices were developed during the late Baby Boomers and Generation X teenage years. Just when we were getting the hang of youth ministry, establishing effective approaches, and practices – the Millennials arrived. They weren't as enthusiastic about our tried and true offerings. The best of our past efforts seemed tired, old, and in need of a major overhaul. They seemed somewhat disconnected to our methods.

Many of our past assumptions about youth and youth ministry are no longer valid with this new generation. So, what makes the Millennial Generation different? There are some core traits of Millennials that distinguish them from past youth generations. The following section will describe these characteristics and the practical implications for those ministering to youth. It must be noted, however, that these are general traits and may not be true for every Millennial teen.

They Are Special

While conducting a parish focus group with senior high Millennials, a young man grumbled that their pastor doled out the same penance to him and his peers. I was expecting the comment to quickly die in isolation. Instead, a symphony of protests made it clear that this was an unacceptable pastoral practice! It was as if they were saying, "I'm a unique sinner who deserves a unique penance!" Furthermore, they wanted their pastor to greet them by name on Sunday mornings. They felt that this was a reasonable expectation.

If we do the math, this should come as no surprise. Millennials were made to feel special. They routinely received trophies by virtue of participation. They are used to being hovered over by their parents, and American society as a whole. They grew up during a period when children were the dominant political agenda and over time they absorbed that message. (Why else would they threaten to call DCFS when parental discipline seemed too harsh!)

The old adage, "Children should be seen, but not heard" was sent hastily into retirement during the eighties. Children were not only seen and heard, but they were recorded and chronicled. Their video toting parents were present at all of their childhood events (often beginning at birth). The lens was always firmly focused on their "stars" and in some ways became a Millennial child's metaphor for life. Not surprisingly, many Millennials have come to understand their

parents' purpose in life to be wrapped around their own well-being, education, and future success.

One might think this kind of collective attention would produce a generation of highly selfish and self-absorbed kids. Not quite. Millennials broke away from the individualism of the Boomers and Gen Xers, focusing instead on the good of the group. While the Boomers sought to be the together individual (e.g., Fonzie from *Happy Days*), the Millennials seek to work together with others for the good of all (e.g., Harry Potter).

Finally, Millennials grew up during the advent of reality television. Celebrity became accessible to commoners through shows like *Real World*. *American Idol* stars begin a season as a "talented guy next door," but end it by becoming a household name. Even guys like William Hung, who have no musical talent to speak of, can be someone quite special. Throw in *YouTube*, and everyone's a star!

Ministry Implications

Recently, I asked a dozen teens whether they felt their parish cared about them. One young man spoke for the crowd when he exclaimed, "They care if we come, but they don't care if we're involved." For many Millennials, going to church and sitting passively is not enough. A part of being "special" is having a special purpose or role in the community. Millennials believe that they have an important individual and collective purpose in the world. Parishes who fall short of offering teens ample opportunities for meaningful involvement will find an increasing number of disconnected youth. They are not content to wait until adulthood to be active in their faith communities and world.

Most parishes are failing to capitalize on the Millennials' collective call to make a difference in the world. Let's face it – teens are not bursting out of our pews, complaining, "You are asking too much from me!" We are guilty more of under-challenging teens – asking so little that we've bored them out of the church. Successfully connecting with today's teens means planting seeds for big dreams. We need to challenge young people, giving them a platform and the tools to be world-changers.

Furthermore, teens are not impressed or persuaded by impersonal and routine invitation, which tends to be convention for many Catholic parishes (e.g., bulletin, mail, Mass announcements). Their parents and much of society – who've paid special attention to their needs, have conditioned them to higher expectations. When a church doesn't behave similarly (or a step above), teens may perceive it as uncaring. Our invitations must be personal and even better, given within an established relationship.

Truth be told, relationship building is still “king of the jungle” in present day youth ministry. Millennials highly value relationships and respond very favorably when youth ministers invest in getting to know them. However, don’t bank on building a relationship to “earn the right to be heard”⁴ with this generation. Relationships with hidden agendas, or used as an instrument for something other than the relationship, tends to leave a sour aftertaste with today’s teens. “Will you accept me for who I am?” inquired teen Boomers and Gen Xers. The Millennials ask, “Will you accept me for who I am *not*?” In other words, do you care about me more than your agenda? Is the activity of catechesis more important than the person being catechized? Will the relationship remain standing if I don’t embrace your faith, values, or way of life?

Finally, if we want to reach a “special” generation, we have to make them feel special when they enter into our community (e.g., larger parish life and youth ministry gatherings). Old fashion hospitality helps teens feel like they belong, are wanted, and have a place among us. For hospitality to truly take hold in a community, it must be highly intentional.

They Are Close To Their Parents

A middle age friend of mine was speaking of her late father. She gave a litany of home projects he completed – cabinet making, flooring, plumbing, electrical work, etc., etc., etc.! Feeling like a home repair flunky, I began to question why I had not accomplished the same feats. Where was all my time going? After reflecting on what my days looked like, I immediately found the guilty culprits: my kids! Instead of doing things around the house, like an accelerating pin ball I bounced from soccer games to wrestling practice to dance recitals to ... you get the picture. Parents of Millennials are highly invested in their children’s lives.

All that time, energy, and focus is resulting in a positive return. Millennials tend to like their parents! As mentioned earlier, over ninety percent report that they “trust” and “feel close” to their parents. Their parents are more likely to be reported as their heroes than any other person. Most identify with their parents’ values. Contrast that with the teenage Boomers, when in 1974 a whopping forty percent said, “That they would be better off living without their parents.”

The conversations parents are having with their teenage children are not the same conversations they had with their parents when they were a teen. Today, parents and their teens more freely discuss issues and topics that almost seemed taboo when they were growing up. Sixty percent of teens say it is “easy” to talk with their parents about sex, alcohol, and drugs. Parents are much more

involved in the issues their children face. In many ways, the generation gap has significantly narrowed with the Millennial Generation. As some say, "The gap has been zapped."

Ministry Implications

Intergenerational and Family Ministry

Much of present day youth ministry is functioning on a Boomer and Gen X teen assumption: youth are rebelling against adult and parental authority and need a place to gather with one another in their own subculture. Segregating teens from the adult population is an unexamined, default practice for most parish youth ministries. However, Millennials are not a rebellious generation who are seeking freedom from out-of-touch adults. From early childhood their lives were highly organized, supervised, and coached by adults. They have grown accustomed to their parents' involvement and adult presence in their lives. The Millennials are a generation who are more open and receptive to intergenerational and family-oriented programs. Most parishes would benefit by offering more of these kinds of activities. Additionally, we should include opportunities for young people to get involved in roles of leadership and ministry that have been primarily reserved for the adult population of our parishes. This might include roles within pastoral councils, worship committees, liturgical ministries, and catechetical ministries.

However, a word of caution: It would be a mistake to take this observation to an extreme by slashing all youth gatherings and only offering intergenerational activities. Young people want and need to be gathered with one another. It's not about switching out the youth ministry menu as much as expanding it by adding some intergenerational variety.

Ministry to Parents

During the past several years there has been a lot of discussion surrounding the *National Study on Youth and Religion* (NSYR). Findings reported that Catholic teens trail behind their Protestant peers on numerous measures of religious belief, experiences, and activities. Catholic teens were anywhere from five percent to twenty-five percent below on most measures. For example, only ten percent of Catholic teens, said religion was "extremely important" in shaping their daily life, while twenty percent of mainline Protestant teens, twenty-nine of conservative Protestant teens and thirty-one of black Protestant teens felt that way.

NSYR research discovered that such differences “can be significantly explained by the lower levels of religiosity of their (Catholic teenagers’) parents” when those parents are compared with Protestant parents. Notably, the parents of the Catholic teens were far less likely than their Protestant counterparts to participate in organized parish activities outside worship.⁵ In other words, teenage faith mirrors parental faith. Again, this should come as no surprise; Millennials share a strong connection with their parents.

The implications are clear: The borders of youth ministry need to be expanded to include outreach to parents. It means collaborating with the pastoral staff members in order to more effectively equip parents in their role as primary religious educators of their children. It means working together to better evangelize the entire parish community. It means not doing youth ministry in an adolescent vacuum. Instead of building disciple-making youth ministries, we need to work collaboratively to grow disciple-making Catholic parishes.

They Are Stressed Out

Millennials are high achievers. They spend more time studying and take heavier course loads in school than previous generations. They are painfully aware that their present performance directly impacts their future opportunities. Boomers and Gen X teens didn’t feel the life-impending pressures of their adolescent faults and failures. Past generations were anxious about nuclear war, violence, and AIDS. Today, teens greatest source of anxiety are their grades and getting into a good college.

With fierce competition for the best colleges, many teens overload on a four-course menu of academics, extracurricular activities, sports, and volunteerism. Many teens choose their multiple involvements based upon how it will look on their college resume. Most teens, especially in the larger communities have more ways to spend their time than time to spend. Remember the good old days when we complained, “If only we offered teens some positive options.” Now with option overload we lament, “If they only had more free time to relax.” To manage their busy schedules, many teens tote PDAs and Day-Timer organizers, once the exclusive appendage of the adult corporate world.

Many sport involvements have swelled to a semi-professional level, requiring both in and out of season commitments. High school athletic success is often hinged on years of previous competitive experience in a sport, year-round weight training, summer camps, and off-season competition. An increasing number of high school athletes have personal trainers, private coaches, and even sport psychologists.

Ministry Implications

The amplification of involvement and achievement has come at a cost: pressure and stress. As church, it's critical that we don't multiply their stress by heaping on more demands, burdens, and requirements. Most teens are not hunting for additional programmatic involvement, as much as hungering to be a part of a community that allows them to rest. In a similar context, Jesus said to a spiritually overburdened audience, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Maybe the best way to evangelize the Millennial Generation is to offer them a God who is bigger than their successes and failures in an authentic church community that offers refuge for their weary bodies, minds, and souls. Teens are not looking for entertainment, flashy presentations to convince them, or another program in which to be involved. Instead, they hunger for integrity of the Gospel message embodied in the community.

They Are Experiential

After working full-time for a couple of years, my Millennial Generation son, Michael, was offered a new job over a thousand miles away. As he was preparing to move, he proudly conveyed to me that he could fit everything he owned into his car. I responded, "You've worked full-time for two years and you can fit everything you own in your car?" He looked at me incredulously and said, "Dad, I'm not into things. I'm into experiences!"

Millennials are collectors of experiences. Knowledge was the coinage of the modern world, but experience is the currency of a postmodern culture (of which Millennials are native citizens). Young people want first-hand encounters – to be fully immersed into the experience of life. They prefer to be sweaty in the ring, wrestling with the realities of life, rather than rationally observing the match from the safety of the intellectual stands.

This makes for a very interactive and participatory approach to life and learning. Teens have always complained about stationary, passive learning, but the protests have hit a crescendo with the Millennials. Today's teens are not content with gathering knowledge about God from an expert. They hunger for an encounter with God and to experience God personally. They do not want to learn about the tenets of prayer as much as experience the presence of God through prayer. They are less interested in lectures on Catholic social teaching than being

immersed in a real-life mission – where they personally experience the face of injustice.

Modern learning tends to begin in the mind, seeking to gain knowledge by studying the facts. Once the facts are understood, one might consider the practical application of those facts. Postmodern Millennials often work in reverse. They begin with the application and afterwards come to understand the facts by reflecting on the experience. In other words, moderns are more prone to reflection and then action, while postmoderns are more inclined to action and then reflection.

Postmodernism

This brings us to an important point: Youth ministry is not only transitioning to a new generation of youth, but we are also experiencing an epistemological passage from a modern to postmodern understanding of the world. While Boomers were born into the height of modernity, Millennials are indigenous to the postmodern era.

Postmodernism is a mindset, a way of looking at life, a worldview. It emerged from philosophical ideas (mostly French) that over time distilled into common cultural expressions (e.g., from the disjointedness of music videos and Internet hyperlinks to interactive learning to common sayings like, “That works for me” or “Get real”).

Postmodernism turns on several key ideas that ultimately dispute the tenets of modernism. Therefore, it can be best understood when contrasted with modernism. The Enlightenment period gave birth to the modern mind, which thought that through the use of human intellect, employing rational and scientific thought, we can discover the laws that govern the universe and utilize them to make a better world. Modernism was optimistic, predicting increasing human progress and agreement as human reason would eventually lead us to unite on universal truths in science, government, economics, technology, etc. Once we found objective truth it would bring about harmony, agreement, and the right way of seeing life. The world was on course to gradually improve and agree. The concrete results were promising: industrial progress, medical advancement, technological breakthroughs, and the colonization of backward cultures. Modernism seemed to promise a bright utopian future for planet Earth.

The twentieth century, however, cast a dark shadow over this sunny outlook. After two world wars, the threat of nuclear destruction, the Jewish Holocaust, and industrial pollution, the means and promise of the modern age were being

questioned. The most “enlightened” cultures of Western Europe used their technological and bureaucratic progress to perfect the most efficient and effective methods of human slaughter and genocide. The world was not uniting in agreement and progressing in the most important arena of life: the service of humanity. Poverty, racial and ethnic discord, crime, and a host of other social problems continued to plague modern society.

Postmodernism emerged from the apparent failures of modernism as a means for human progress and a moral framework for culture. Postmodern thinkers challenged modern thought on several fronts. First, a postmodern perspective erodes the surety of human reason as the exclusive purveyor of truth. The claim that the mind can know objective truth, a truth that stands outside our world, is impossible. Everything observed occurs within history, context, and perspective. Furthermore, it is conveyed through language that is imprecise and subject to interpretation. Like the Emperor who had no clothes, the nakedness of the human intellect as the sole means to objective truth became obvious to postmodern philosophers.

The dethroning of rational thought opened the door to additional approaches for mining truth. The postmodern mind recognizes the validity of feelings, relationships, intuition, and experiences as means to arriving at truth. The spiritual, which was often treated pejoratively by moderns, is esteemed once again in postmodernism. Furthermore, the abstract thought-based lecture as the primary mode to learning is replaced by more artistic means of communication such as story, metaphor, and film. Learning is more participative and experiential.

Secondly, truth moved from the abstract locale of one’s mind, or propositional truths, to what is experienced in real life. The judgment of what is true is what is real, and works in one’s situation and context. For example, postmoderns are not impressed by the propositional truth that the church is “the Body of Christ.” It is a meaningless thought if it isn’t an embodied reality of that title. In other words, if the church isn’t functioning as the presence of Jesus in the world, doing what Jesus did, than it isn’t true, or at least credible.

The implications of this way of thinking are profound. The church has to look a lot more like Jesus in order to attract postmodern Millennials. The Church, as “the treasury of truth” may be attractive to the modern mind, but leaves postmoderns lacking. Postmoderns are looking for the Church to live, be an example of, and embody the gospel message. Evangelization, practiced as the *proclamation of Jesus*, may have to give way to “immanuelization,” where our communities of faith are the *presence of Jesus* to the world. This is why so many

young people are attracted to service. Teens profoundly encounter Jesus through identifying with his mission and through the eyes of those they serve – almost reversing the conventional order of spiritual growth.

Thirdly, being that truth has become localized and subjective, the postmodern worldview replaces knowledge with interpretation. The same event can be seen differently depending on your vantage point. Therefore, truth can be plural. There may be several truths – truths that work for you and truths that work for me. Furthermore, it is arrogant and disrespectful to judge another's perception of truth. Seeking to canonize one's version of truth over another's is seen as a play for control, power, and domination. Some of the modern era's greatest injustices and tragedies were vindicated by such a mentality.

Again, there are profound implications when ministering to youth. Arrogance is a capital sin in the eyes of the postmodern. We must be careful not to be harsh or judgmental of others who may not share our viewpoint. Treating others with respect gives our way of life credibility. Young people will see that it "works." Additionally, we need to approach the teachings of Scripture and the Church from a practical standpoint. Teens want to know how it interacts with real life. Instead of pontificating, "These are God's commandments – now adjust!" we may emphasize how wise and loving God is to give us a code for life that truly works.

Finally, because postmodern truth is based in practical reality, it is also related to the Millennials' preference for authenticity. Instead of focusing on what one should be, and therefore, creating distance between one another, people should deal with their honest realities and open the door to experience greater connection and intimacy. Millennials are attracted to authentic community. They are not looking for something to believe in as much as a community in which to belong. They connect in their brokenness.

Conclusion

The world has indeed changed. Our young people are different. They are a new and distinct generation and see and understand life in a very divergent manner. Yet, are our parishes changing? Are our methods and approaches in youth ministry changing from their Boomer and Generation X teenage roots?

Catholic youth ministry stands at a crossroads. As we stand at the intersection, may we be reminded of Jesus' words, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." (Mark 8:35) Trying to go back to an earlier era and save the Church as we know it may

mean losing a generation that doesn't relate any longer to our approaches and methodologies. In many ways we are presented with an incredible opportunity to become more real, loving, tolerant, community-oriented, and service-focused.

Leonard Sweet poses the rhetorical questions "Will *we* live the time God has given *us*? Or will *we* live a time *we* would prefer to have?"⁶ Since these past years have moved us beyond the cusp and into the postmodern age, what study, paradigm, and practice must we as youth ministers pursue for relevancy and usefulness in ministry to this generation? Are we willing to look at ourselves as Church and honestly pursue ways of reaching the postmoderns with the Good News? Or will we settle for the status quo and refuse to address the cultures with which we are faced?

¹ Peter Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*, New York: Harper's Business, 1993, p. 1.

² Statistics and trends cited are taken from chapter 3, *A New Generation of Americans, Millennials and the Pop Culture*. Neil Howe and William Strauss, Life Course Associates, 2006.

³ Gen-X Parents Putting Tighter Rein on Schools, *Arizona Daily Star*, October 16, 2005, Daniel Scarpinato.

⁴ A phrase coined by the founder of Young Life, Jim Rayburn, that became the motto for relational youth ministry for over twenty years.

⁵ For a detailed analysis see *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁶ Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group 2000), p. 47.