

I am grateful to readers who sent me these first two articles. They seem to address the issue of inclusion perfectly. Let me hear what you think. Submit articles that contradict or challenge their conclusions.

## **Religious Life in the Age of Facebook Where have all the young people gone?**

By Richard G. Malloy

JULY 7, 2008

Why aren't young men and women entering religious life today? A long list of answers has been floating for years among vocation recruiters, novitiate staffs and religious communities. Among them: young adults today are commitment-phobic; a "spiritual but not religious" stance makes religious life too constricting; families are smaller and less likely to support someone choosing to enter religious life; the average age in most communities has risen to a point where a young person is actually entering a retirement home, not a novitiate; the church after the Second Vatican Council has failed to inculcate in young adult Catholics a sense of commitment to the institutional church; young women (and some young men) are alienated by the patriarchal and/or hierarchical nature of priesthood and the church; celibacy is incomprehensible in our overly sexualized age; the horrific and pervasive evidence of sexual and financial scandals in the church makes the young look elsewhere as they choose professions and careers; there are deep intellectual and cultural confusions over the meaning(s) of God, Jesus, church, salvation and priesthood.

The list could go on, but the facts remain: in 1965 there were 45.6 million Catholics and 48,992 seminarians in the United States studying for the priesthood, while in 2006 there were 69.1 million Catholics and only 5,642 seminarians. Similar or more severe declines have been registered in the number of people becoming men or women religious.

After 15 years of interacting with college students (the past five years living in a student dormitory), I can identify certain cultural currents running through the lives of young adults. Like riptides, hidden but strong, these pull persons in their 20s far from the shores of religious life. Such cultural phenomena are off the radar of men and women religious today, mostly because the cultural world of the young people we would hope to attract to our communities differs so much from our own. As a cultural anthropologist, I was taught that good fieldwork reveals what everyone knows but no one in the host culture talks about. What follows are several truths that many young adults know but seldom express to their elders. Some of these cultural currents are not readily apparent to them, though when I have run these ideas by young adults, I have met with wide agreement.

1. One's culture consists of what one knows. Today's young adults do not know very much about Jesus, the church, the faith or religious life. In fact, young adults do not know many things that used to be common knowledge among Catholics, and they often know more about other faiths than they do about their own religious tradition. When one excited young woman ran up to me and exclaimed, "I'm going to study Buddhism. It's so cool!" I said, "Wow. Did you ever think of studying the religion that teaches that God

became what we are so we could become what God is”? “Ooh, that sounds cool. What one’s that?” she asked. “Catholicism,” I answered, the faith in which she had been baptized and confirmed.

Culturally, we are the stories we tell. Too easily we assume that young adult Catholics know who St. Francis or St. Ignatius was, but we assume such at our peril. Today’s young adults know Harry and Hermione better than Jesus, Mary and Joseph. One student I spoke to last year thought Vatican II was the name of a pope!

Also problematic are the general intellectual abilities of today’s young adults. Most college students today would balk at the workload the Jesuits threw at high school students in the 1970s. In our first year we read the Documents of Vatican II; in sophomore year, the Dutch catechism. Today’s reading lists for Theology 101 at most universities are decidedly lighter fare. Students will not or cannot plow through Rahner.

This makes the act of intellectually synthesizing the various modes of truth present in Catholic tradition quite difficult for the average student. To argue that analogous conceptions of truth are not equivocal, but in fact more meaningful than univocal truths, stuns young adults, if they can follow the reasoning. To grasp that the Gospel infancy narratives may be true, even though the stories themselves are not historically or scientifically accurate, is a real task for those educated in a culture that leaves little room for nuance. Young adults have intellectual difficulty coming to terms with the intricacies of our faith tradition. In the 1950s and 1960s, older teens and young adults knew what the beatific vision was, and many yearned to see God face to face (1 Cor 13:12); today all we have given them (or all they have paid attention to) is Facebook.com.

2. In the past one entered a novitiate with people who were culturally similar and found the process easy. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, most seminarians had attended similar Catholic high schools, and most were young adults unencumbered by other life commitments. Entrance was rather easy: you told a member of the order at your school that you were interested in joining, and in most cases you were in. No longer.

Most people thinking of entering religious life today are much older than in previous eras; they are of various ages, and as a group they are more diverse. They are concerned about what will happen to their 401(k) account, cell phone contract, apartment lease, car, dog and more. To enter a novitiate, they are being asked to break off a set of adult relationships and responsibilities that might be five, 10 or 15 years old.

The process too has grown complex. I have taken to describing the process of admission to the Jesuits, for example, as long, difficult and often uncomfortably invasive. We do want young people to “make it.” But some are put off by the sheer complexity of interviews, psychological testing and the introduction to prayer and spiritual direction.

3. One’s culture is a set of relationships, a base upon which one makes life choices and commitments. Among all their relationships, young adults know few young religious sisters, brothers or priests. A daunting fact of vocation recruitment today is that those

doing the recruiting are no longer 10 or 15 years older than the person being recruited; the recruiters are decades older. How many 50-year-olds seek out 75-year-olds with whom to go to a movie or dinner? Why would a 30-year-old want to join a community where the youngest members are 50 or 60? Two recent books, *Googling God*, by Mike Hayes, and *Young Adult Catholics*, by Dean Hoge, reveal how radically different young adults' relationships are, not just with the church, but with much of culture and society, when compared with those of people who came of age in earlier decades.

Also, a study released in 2008 by the Pew Forum indicates that fully one in three Americans who were baptized as Catholics no longer identify themselves as Catholic and increasing numbers of young people choose no religious affiliation at all. This is a significant change from the 1950s and 60s.

4. Young adults live in a media world unfamiliar to most priests and religious. DVD's, Facebook, Myspace, Halo 3, Wii, cell phones, Madden football—these are the constant companions of young adults, as familiar to them as Notre Dame football, “The Bells of St. Mary’s” and foreign missionaries were to Catholics of the 1950s and 1960s. When we tell a young person we do not know how to take a picture with a cell phone, we are communicating not only that we are “out of it,” but that we fall on the spectrum somewhere between imbecilic and incompetent.

5. Young adults experience gender issues, sexuality and the relational world very differently than most priests and religious. From sexual experimentation in their preteens to cohabitation while in college and to comfort with issues of sexual diversity, the experience of young people has changed significantly in recent decades. A president having an affair in the Oval Office? That was front-page news when today's young adults were in middle school. The attitudes of a typical priest or religious on such matters seem anywhere from archaic and prudish to insensitive and uninformed to young adults whose parents, peers and professors preach not just tolerance but wholehearted acceptance of a wide range of sexualities and lifestyle choices. A church that condemns such sexual choices and practices is seen by a large majority of today's educated Catholics not as prophetic but as narrow-minded and prejudiced.

Many men, socialized in a culture where women are considered equal, are reluctant to embrace a profession that routinely relegates women to second-class status. With women running corporations and universities, serving as Speaker of the House and campaigning to become president of the United States, many Catholics find incomprehensible a church declaration that one cannot even discuss the ordination of women. A cultural worldview that champions the elimination of sexism has little sympathy for a church that enshrines sexism as a practice supposedly instituted by Christ. As we obstinately refuse to ordain women, we are ordaining fewer and fewer men. The two phenomena may be more closely linked than we realize or are willing to admit.

6. Issues of money and race are significant but rarely discussed in religious communities. More and more young adults say they must work off a crushing student debt before they can even consider entering religious life or getting married. Recruiters from the founding

religious orders of many Catholic institutions find that potential candidates from these same schools often take as much as a decade to pay off their student loans, making it difficult for them to consider the possibility of a vocation.

Other sensitive issues concern race and class. Many religious orders are overwhelmingly white and decidedly upper-middle-class in taste and temperament. Latino and African-American Catholics who look into religious orders in the United States see communities where contemporary music is unknown, ethnic foods are rarely served and communication styles reflect middle-class backgrounds. Prospective candidates who grew up in homes where incomes were near or below median family income are often put off by the L. L. Bean lifestyle of some male religious. On the other hand, young women from semi-affluent backgrounds cannot imagine how they could survive on the meager stipends most religious women receive for personal spending, often much less than \$100 a month. When I told one Jesuit that median family income in the United States was \$48,200, he denied it and argued, "If that were true, how could people afford to go to our schools?" His reply showed a social and cultural myopia often present in our communities.

A study of "best practices" of those religious institutes that have successfully accepted and integrated persons of diverse backgrounds would be helpful. The Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, of which I am a member, counts only three African-American Jesuits as members and no Latinos from poor inner-city families. Both a Latino from Camden, N.J. (per capita income \$12,739), and a Georgetown graduate from adjacent Cherry Hill, N.J. (per capita income \$38,284), will face cultural challenges when trying to form community in a novitiate.

7. American society may not be producing people who are able to live religious life. Perhaps more problematic are the cultural deficiencies of American upper-middle-class families. In *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids* (2007), the psychologist Madeline Levine describes children (often from economically comfortable families) who are in deep emotional distress. One young woman Levine describes is a "cutter," who wears a long-sleeved T-shirt with a thumbhole in the sleeve. She is covering up a forearm into which she has repeatedly carved the word "empty" with a razor. Too many of our young are empty. The anorexic cheerleader; the star football player contemplating suicide; the nerdy genius at Stanford filled with a numb, nameless rage because she did not get into Harvard; the aimless young man living in his parents' basement with only video games to look forward to; the legion of others who suffer from "failure to launch." If these are in deep distress, how much better off are the young adults who are "making it"? Problems ranging from serious addictions to attention deficit disorder permeate the young adult population. Older novitiate programs did not have to deal with these, at least not on the level or with the frequency that they do today.

Nonetheless, there is some hope. Whenever I find myself wondering about the viability of religious life in the United States or the future of the church, I read up on the history of the church at the end of the 15th century. Do we think things look bad now? Then popes

were presiding over sexual intrigues and murders in the Vatican. The little friar Savonarola was setting the match to the “bonfire of the vanities,” until he himself became fuel for the flames. Corruption was rampant in the church. Yet in the wake of that era there emerged St. Ignatius Loyola, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Ávila. May our troubled times produce such sanctity.

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### **Catholicism should lower the drawbridge**

by Barney Zwartz, Religion Editor of the *Brisbane Times*  
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Some changes to church doctrines would make it more appealing.

In less than a month, Pope Benedict will celebrate Mass in Sydney before an expected congregation of 500,000 — the high point of the week-long World Youth Day celebration that the Catholic Church in Australia hopes will revitalise church attendance and religious commitment.

Secular critics fear that — helped by an ever-rising injection of Government funds, so far about \$130 million — it may. Many Catholics are sceptical. Yes, there will be a media-fuelled surge of interest. Devout young Catholics will find their faith affirmed, and some less-committed will be reached. But many young people will attend in the same spirit as a concert — an interesting event, but not life-changing.

The church would be wrong to put all its eggs in the World Youth Day basket. As it enters its third millennium, it needs another bout of self-examination of the sort it has done sporadically through the centuries.

The issues today are as serious as any in the past: plummeting Mass attendance, the dramatic decline in priests and religious orders, the advance of secularism, the challenge of Islam, and especially the alienation of ordinary Catholics from the institutional church. Disenchantment over such issues as contraception, the place of women, authoritarianism and the sexual abuse crisis have left millions still believing in Jesus but not the church.

Now it is time to try a touch of democracy. Some relatively simple reforms would not affect the church's core teaching of hope and salvation, which are non-negotiable. But how the church operates as an institution should always be open to self-examination.

Three books in recent months by leading Australian Catholics — philosopher Max Charlesworth, former priest and Catholic commentator Paul Collins and former Sydney bishop Geoffrey Robinson — have suggested such reforms.

They want to curb papal power and the Curia — the Vatican bureaucracy that is virtually all male, all clerical and unaccountable to the wider church — and to re-examine certain doctrines, peripheral accretions over time, that could be readily changed. These include allowing married priests, contraception and greater involvement by laymen and women.

Charlesworth discusses the conflict between the values liberal democracies take for granted and the almost totalitarian rule the Vatican seeks over its adherents. It wasn't always so, he argues, and it needn't be now.

The way the Vatican's doctrinal watchdog, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, treats dissident theologians — its "Star Chamber methods" — are, he says, completely at odds with elementary principles of justice. The insistence that Catholics should obey their bishops before their consciences is another conflict, since the basis of democratic society is the freedom of the individual to make judgements of conscience.

Particularly revealing is the church's response to revelations of priestly sexual abuse and the long institutional cover-up, finally exposed by an American lay group, Voice of the Faithful, and the media. The fact that the church still hasn't dealt with it well reflects the hierarchy's discomfort at being challenged by laypeople.

Despite all this, there is a strong similarity (not coincidental) between Christian and democratic values, such as equality, freedom, conscience and human dignity. Politically, these values are protected by the constitution, universal suffrage and an array of checks and balances. Why shouldn't the church operate the same way? Why not let laypeople vote for the Pope? They did for the first 1000 years. And it took centuries for today's authoritarian structure to emerge out of a variety of local systems.

These suggestions horrify conservative Catholics, because the majority can easily be wrong. The church's motto is *semper eadem* ("always the same") because it is the repository and guardian of religious truth for all time and cannot be subject to the tides of intellectual fashion.

In fact, of course, the church can and does change — both culturally and theologically — around the edges while maintaining its central message. For centuries, the church justified persecution and bad faith on the grounds that "error has no rights".

But the reforming Vatican II council in the 1960s recognised that "in matters of religion no one can be forced to act in a manner contrary to his beliefs" — a massive U-turn that the church presented as a "development". It took 1000 years for celibacy to become a requirement for priests (even then for purely practical reasons), while papal infallibility has been a formal doctrine for only 138 years.

In all its "developments", the church has rightly been responding to its environment. Today it has come to terms with its diminished role in a pluralistic West, and explicitly accepts that other religions contain truth.

Given the often-justified criticism of the institutional church, it's easy to forget that it has been an enormous force for good: tending people, promoting justice, providing education, offering compassion, consolation and hope. It will keep doing it — but how much more successfully if it can lower the last drawbridges and emerge from behind the battlements.

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Father Andrew Greeley wrote the following, which appeared in the Chicago Sun Times on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. Grateful that his voice still addresses the tradition upon which America and the Church were are built.

### **Bush Used Phony Patriotism to Start War**

by Andrew Greeley

The Russians call World War II “The Great Patriotic War.” The current longest of our wars could well be called the same thing. It is a war that originated in the orgy of patriotism (“U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!”) that followed the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and has been sustained by the patriotism of those who support it (“Our soldiers are defending American freedom”) and false promises of some latter-day prophets (“We are winning the war in Iraq.”) It is likely to be revived by the Iranian attack that the McCainites see as their main chance of winning the election.

The president was right in his spontaneous reaction when he first heard of the attack — “This is war!” The subtext was, “Now I’ll be a wartime president and people will forget about Florida and how Antonin Scalia stole the election.” The Arabs had killed 3,000 Americans; we had to kill at least that many of them.

The issue was: Which Arabs? The obvious target was Saudi Arabia. Most of the terrorists were from that country, indeed products of the religious education that the country provided for its devout young men. But the Saudi royal family has excellent relations with the American oil companies. So very early in the discussions the neo-cons in the administration began to promote the idea of attacking Iraq. The road to Jerusalem, they argued, is through Baghdad. The administration’s neo-cons were (and are) very heavy thinkers. They write great memos. The days when the country was hesitating, some of them found a story about cooperation between al-Qaida and the Iraq government that seemed to legitimate an attack on Iraq. Some of their allies in the media, most notably the Wall Street Journal, insisted that this fable was true.

Much of the literature on the Longest War finds it hard to explain how the decision was made to attack Iraq. Poor Scott McClellan had it part right in his book. The administration, influenced by the memos of the neo-cons, decided that toppling Saddam Hussein would restructure the Middle East to American advantage. But that was a thesis too complicated to sell to the American people. Therefore, the desire for patriotic revenge was used in combination with fear of Iraq’s (as it turns out nonexistent) weapons to

launch a great patriotic war. The Republican Party continues to rely on this lethal combination to win elections.

National security means kill Arabs. We get our revenge by protecting our children. We start a patriotic war in the name of self-protection and spread patriotic gore by killing Arabs. Neat!

It is not the first patriotic/revenge war on which the country has embarked. Remember the Maine. Remember the Alamo. Remember Fort Sumter. Remember Pearl Harbor. The psychology for whipping up revenge in the name of patriotism has always worked. World War II was a just war, but the mix of patriotism and revenge made it easy for the American military to firebomb out of existence 50 Japanese cities and to destroy a couple more with atom bombs.

Are the American people guilty of a war crime because of the Iraq war? Surely the leaders who cooked up the excuses for the war are. So, too, are the national media that allowed patriotism to silence them. So, too, are those ordinary Americans who almost insisted on some kind of patriotic gore. On this weekend in which we glorify — with good reason — our patriotism, we might examine our conscience about what phony patriotism has caused us to do. A third of the American population supported the war and has now changed its mind. It might be wise for such folk to prepare answers to the kinds of questions God might ask about phony patriotism.

[And the truth shall set you free!](#)