

Let youth renew Catholicism

I heard a wonderful talk last week at the Diocesan Leadership Days conference in Geneva. Kathleen Chesto was speaking about the faith lives of "Generation X'ers" and she used an image that seemed to me appropriate for all our generations to think about. Chesto referred to an old railroad bridge near Albany that is visible to travellers on the New York State Thruway. The interesting part of this particular bridge is that it is now in disuse, and it is not connected on either end. It is simply a large cement pillar sitting in the middle of the Mohawk River with a railroad track balancing across its top. It isn't attached to anything. In a word, it's "going nowhere!"

Chesto's use of this image was marvelous and I cannot hope to duplicate it here. She used it to illustrate certain tendencies among many of us church-goers. We sometimes spend incredible amounts of energy tending to aspects of our religion, forgetting about the purpose of it all. We simply do not focus on the primary end of why it all exists at all! It's as if we work very hard to strengthen, beautify, redecorate, fret about, even *fight about* the bridge itself, without caring that it no longer connects to any destination! We care about how the bridge looks, what we allow to be put on it, we work to fortify it, to protect it against "enemies," we identify those who are "in our camp" agreeing with us and disagreeing with us about decisions concerning the



the
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By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

bridge.

The problem is that we haven't noticed that the bridge we're working on is not attached at either end. It isn't connected to the sources from which future travellers may be coming, and it isn't connected to destinations toward which travellers may be moving.

Chesto's image does indeed seem to illustrate what sometimes happens to sincere and committed church members at times. The immediate chores of tending to the *parts* that make up our parishes and church life can obscure the end toward which we should be striving. The very point of Catholicism can become obscured at times because we care more about the "stuff" of our religion and getting the components of church life right, than we do about the "essence" of it all.

The mission of the church is, ultimately, reconciliation of the world and all of us with God. There are a host of images, many of them from Scripture,

that illustrate the meaning of this mission. The Prodigal Son's return to his father, for example, offers us an image that draws forth the meaning of why we belong to the church at all. The church exists to facilitate our turning back to God, which we do all our life long. All church rituals, church rules and teachings, our parish and community life, our ministries and outreach to those in need, all these are directed at fostering unity and relationship with God. For us to neglect the point of why we are church members at all is, indeed, to live and act in vain.

As Ms. Chesto moved through her talk last week, building on her use of the bridge image, she spoke of young adults as particular gifts to the church who can help those of us in older generations to move away from some of our "directionless bridge tending." Newer generations can help us move toward a more focused view of the "ends" of the religion we practice. Chesto echoed other writers on this same topic, pointing out that younger Catholics will be defined by characteristics that are not identical to previous generations, but can complement them.

In particular, those who follow us in faith are more likely than we have been to put compassion before legalism. In this, younger Catholics will resemble Jesus in important ways, and can help all of us to appreciate the importance of forming parish communities that emphasize

belonging and acceptance even before bringing up and emphasizing "the rules," church laws or local parish customs.

Younger Catholics are also more intent than we have been on developing an active, defined spiritual life. For them the Catholic tradition is likely to function more as a "spiritual path" than it has done for us. They seek assistance in the spiritual life and strive to integrate their life experiences and goals into a meaningful framework that fosters spiritual awareness and union with God. In this, our children will be less likely than we have been, perhaps, to focus on the bridge rather than where it's going.

The task for us as parents, as church ministers and as "older Catholics" will be to welcome new generations and rejoice in the gifts and perspectives they will bring to the renewal of our own Catholicism. For us to try to "mold" the next generation so that it looks just like we looked, to expect it to emphasize in Catholicism exactly what we did will be a mistake. What can benefit all of us instead will be our willingness to explore our own need for newer visions of Catholicism that younger generations can help with. We will all need to develop the pastoral flexibility that will enable us to avoid refurbishing bridges that actually lead nowhere.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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