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## Young adults

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"The church isn't willing to meet their needs, so they say 'I can find God anywhere — why should I stay here?'" Hood said.

"I think it will be hard to gain young adults. So many people are rejecting the invitation, saying, 'I can do it on my own.' It's the whole rejection of structure and rules," Echter commented.

How can this tide be stemmed? The church may need to re-tool its evangelizing methods, said Tom McCarty, keynote speaker for Ministry Day.

"We need to have the humility to acknowledge that maybe the map needs updating," McCarty remarked.

McCarty, executive director of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, said parish leaders must abandon such sayings as, "But we've never done that here" and "This is the way we've always done it."

"If we're serious about evangelizing, it's not just about changing hearts. It's also about having our hearts change," McCarty emphasized.

Writing in the April 1999 *U.S. Catholic* magazine, Robert Ludwig ventured that "perhaps in Catholicism, we have confused the means with the end, or even forgotten the end and made sacred the means."

"The end or goal is the reign of God that transforms, renews, and gives life. It is all about experiencing the rapture of being alive, about experiencing eternity right here and now. Everything else — scripture, doctrine, the ethical codes, structures — are but means," Ludwig added in his article "Can Faith Have Fire Without Brimstone?" Ludwig is campus ministry director and professor of Catholic studies at DePaul University.

## Rejection of structure

McCarty, in his Ministry Day talk, listed numerous historical events that have helped shape a society — and church — fraught with suspicion. For example, he said that the Vietnam War and Watergate served to make young adults very distrustful of institutions. Other modern threats to the Catholic Church, he said, include legalized abortion, the birth control pill, and rises in violence and fractured families.

In his 1998 book *Losing Your Religion, Finding Your Faith*, published by Paulist Press, Father Brett Hoover, CSP, added that young adults have been inundated by messages from popular culture that life must be exciting. Young adults "will not pray unless it brings a 'spiritual high,'" Father Hoover asserted.

McCarty observed that membership in



specific denominations is giving way to what he calls "the spiritual journey." He noted that in 1957, 97 percent of Americans said they belonged to an organized religion — but that figure has now dropped to less than 60 percent.

"Young people are incredibly spiritual. Are they losing their faith? Nope. Are they losing their religion? Yes," McCarty said.

Tom Beaudoin addressed this notion in an article, "Irreverently Yours: A Message from Generation X," in the April 1999 *U.S. Catholic*. Beaudoin wrote that today's young adult Catholics are products of cultural shifts that demand open-mindedness.

"A great many of us will be skeptical of — or simply refuse — any talk about a God who is present narrowly in only one community, only one religious tradition, amidst only one race, or who is manifest in only one sexual identity. We know, almost intuitively, that if God is really God, this God is not bound by the walls of one church or the biases of one culture," Beaudoin wrote.

Beaudoin is co-founder of Xairos, a Generation X Catholic ministry at the Paulist Center in Boston. Generation X is a common term for Americans born from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. The term attempts to sum up a generation marked by ambiguity — hence, the "X" tag.

Beaudoin feels the current era of exploring alternatives to structures is a positive trend that he links to biblical times.

"The prophets of Hebrew scripture and Jesus himself all had their deep suspicions of institutionalized religion," Beaudoin wrote.

However, the institutional Catholic Church was the norm for much of the 20th century, Ludwig observed. He labeled today's young adult Catholics as the "generation after hell," explaining that in the wake of Vatican II, this is the first generation not driven by the threat of eternal damnation.

"Hell was a fundamental presupposition for our regular attendance at Mass and frequent participation in the sacraments. An ethic grounded in fear and guilt served for our basic involvement in Catholicism," Ludwig wrote.

## Evangelizing tips

To evangelize today's young adults,

Karen Rinefierd said that a welcoming tone must be set by the pastor and other parish leaders. This immersion into the faith community, she stressed, is even more vital than starting a young adult group.

"I would hope that people take real seriously the small steps. Does anybody greet them? When young adults come forward to ask about marriage preparation or arranging a funeral, how are they treated?" said Rinefierd, outgoing diocesan coordinator of young adult, adult and family ministry.

Rinefierd noted that Ministry Day touched upon three top concerns raised by parishes in the diocesan pastoral planning process: evangelization, ministry to youth and ministry to young adults. She added that the Year 2000 jubilee theme of reconciliation ties in as well, saying that there is need for reconciliation between the Catholic Church and young adults who have stopped participating.

She suggested that parishes embrace young adults' ideas and desire to be involved, saying it's disheartening to be successful in a career "and then give your ideas to a parish and be told you're naive. Most people won't come back after that."

McCarty observed that young adults are well aware of the church's stand against abortion, contraception and premarital sex, but may not have heard enough about their faith from a good-news standpoint.

"We have to do a better job of saying what we're for," McCarty said. "We should be excited, getting people to say, 'I want what you have.'"

McCarty suggested focusing on the goodness of the sacraments, and also mentioning such Catholics as Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was so proud of his faith that he was willing to die for it. In addition, he said, older adults should always take advantage of dropping some sort of "soundbite," mentioning a positive aspect of their faith, when conversing with young adults.

At the same time, McCarty acknowledged, articulating one's faith can be easier said than done if you're not accustomed to speaking about it.

"Evangelization is a humbling activity," he admitted.

Echter noted that the task might be especially hard for Catholics who were accustomed to a more low-key approach prior to Vatican II.

"For the older community, it wasn't done," Echter said. However, she added, she's encouraged that the diocese devoted a whole day to the needs of young adults at Ministry Day.

A leading model for evangelizing young adults, McCarty remarked, is none other than Pope John Paul II. He pointed out that the pope reflects his love for youth by holding such events as World Youth Day

every two years. This expression of caring is so powerful, McCarty said, that young adults will respond to the pope even if they don't agree with him on all church issues.

"He embodies what young people are missing in their lives," McCarty said. "They see he's committed; he walks the talk. Why do they even listen? Because he loves them — whereas in the past, it was because the pope is the pope."

Hood pointed out that the onus is not on older Catholics alone. He said that young adults themselves must be open to being evangelized, even when they encounter obstacles in their faith.

"I struggle and wrestle with it. If it was a job at Kodak, I might walk away and get another job," Hood said. "But this is my faith, so I wrestle and stay."

## Alive in faith

Though participation may not always be evident, McCarty said that young adult Catholics still care deeply about their faith.

"There's an incredible hunger for the holy — for a faith that makes sense," McCarty said.

Rinefierd agreed, remarking that young adults are the primary audience of numerous best-selling books on spirituality.

"This is probably the most spiritual generation ever," Rinefierd said.

McCarty added that today's young Catholics are also committed to volunteer work and advocacy.

"There is a hunger for justice. People want to make a difference," McCarty said.

"Young people have the highest level of volunteerism of any age range in our society."

Hood said that once issues of mistrust have been overcome, young adults are firmly dedicated to church life.

"If people connect, I'm amazed at the amount they will give," he said.

McCarty said he saw vivid examples of faith when he visited Littleton, Colo., the week after a shooting siege at Columbine High School left 15 people dead.

McCarty spoke with several Catholic high-school students who survived the April 20 rampage. In many instances, he reported, the first thing they wanted to do afterward was go to church.

"Right away they wanted a place they felt safe in. I was overwhelmed by their need to pray, the need to have Mass together," McCarty said. "I've never been so proud to be a Catholic."

McCarty said that the teens were so strong in their faith, they were able to work past their grief and believe that their fallen friends are now with Jesus.

"If your criteria for faith is how much kids know," McCarty said, "then you could say kids are losing their faith. But if it's how do they act — these kids (in Littleton) were acting like disciples."

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