

Church focus on tradition and truth offers new appeal for young people

The saying goes, 'If you don't hear crying, the church is dying.'

A Pew Research study shows that Canada's church membership is becoming an aging demographic and the number of people identifying as non-religious in Canada is growing, particularly among those under the age of forty.

An earlier 2013 study, also by Pew Research, showed the most non-religious Canadians were those aged 25 to 44, and this non-religious proportion has grown six-fold since 1971.

While the data may appear discouraging, many young Catholics in Alberta are bucking that trend.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that young people turn away from the Church because of its old-fashioned ways, youth coordinators in the Edmonton Archdiocese say the focus on tradition and truth attracts – rather than repels – young people.

"They're not wanting us to be shallow or superficial when imparting the faith," said Lisa MacQuarrie, the coordinator of youth evangelization for the Archdiocese of Edmonton. "They're interested in learning the deeper meanings of the faith. Like Eucharistic adoration – once young people have experienced that, it's something that's so powerful for them."

MacQuarrie's comments come just days after the release of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*, which calls on the Church to invest more vigorously in youth and young adults. The exhortation emerged from the Synod of Bishops on young people, faith and vocations held late last year in Rome.

The document is a combination letter to young people about their place in the Church and a plea to older members of the Church not to stifle the enthusiasm of the young, but to offer gentle guidance when needed.



Owen Aguiar

For some young Catholics, the attraction to the Church is a mixture of truth and tradition.

“Keeping the beauty with things like icons and stained-glass windows, I think that really draws in attention and sets us aside from other churches,” said 15-year-old Owen Aguiar of St. Albert.

“With some parishes, they try to be more ‘cool,’ but just to be authentic would draw me closer. I want to see something that’s different from the everyday. Something more spiritual; something more reverent.”

Aguiar, who attends the Latin Mass at St. Edmond’s Parish in Edmonton, the sacred sound of the Gregorian chant adds a majestic and mysterious element to Mass.

“I’ve been seeing a lot more sacred music and more reverence in a lot of parishes, and I’m really happy to see that,” said Aguiar. “I’ve had a lot more touching experiences with our Lord, not only in Mass but through adoration, because of the reverence and the beauty that these parishes show in what they do.”



Jamie Schwark

For 26-year-old Jamie Schwark, a cradle Catholic, it's the Church's unwavering commitment to the truth that encourages her and the growth of her faith.

"One thing that draws me to the Church in particular is integrity," said Schwark. "I took a Church history class on the foundations of Catholicism, and the fact that the Church remains the same through all the ages really draws me to it. As opposed to different Christian denominations, where a lot of it is based on how we feel or just doing good things. This is really rooted in truth, in history and the Scriptures. It never contradicts itself."

Aguiar agrees. Instead of being repelled by Church moral teaching, he's attracted by it.

"This may seem weird, but I actually like the rules that stop me from doing sinful things," he said. "I know that this is the real church, that you get punished for your actions, and that you might not go to heaven if you stay in mortal sin."

In Edmonton, monthly events such as ***Sancti*** or Facebook groups such as **St. Thomas More Parish's Young Adults** are focused on university students and young adults. Even the parish's altar server program is thriving because of the emphasis it puts on giving depth and understanding to the traditions of the Church.

It's little things – like learning that the purpose of genuflecting on our right knee is because knights would carry their swords on their left side – that young people find captivating.



Sara Dmitri

“Even small things like that, kids find it cool,” said Sara Dmitri, the youth evangelization coordinator at St. Thomas More. “How we clean the vestments, why we have to have deep respect for the crumbs of the Eucharist, so many things that most of us don’t realize the depths to – that’s something that’s intriguing to the new generation.”

MacQuarrie has not seen an overall trend in terms of youth attendance, but has heard anecdotally about individual parishes where younger members are a growing demographic. Achieving that requires a commitment of the entire parish to make that trend a possibility, including the support from church leadership.

“Some parishes do put more focus on youth involvement and have a passion for that. It’s no longer just the responsibility of that one youth minister, it really has to be a commitment on behalf of that parish to support that welcoming atmosphere and to be open to step aside and create space in leadership for younger people,” said MacQuarrie.

“It’s more intimidating to get involved if the church leadership is predominantly an older demographic. That personal invitation can be the encouragement to take a risk and be more involved, whether that be to sit on the parish council or to just do a reading. It’s not a strategy to keep numbers up or keep people from leaving; it’s really about building authentic relationships and becoming that place of shared community.”

MacQuarrie attended the recent Religious Education Congress in Anaheim, California, which included lessons from parishes that had high youth and young family attendance.

For Jamie Schwark, a key aspect of attracting young people to the Church is the sense of community. She has met many of her close friends through her parish, crediting a strong bond between people of her own age group.

“It’s nice to be able to find answers and figure things out as a peer group, having other young people to bounce my ideas and my thoughts off of,” Schwark said. “As opposed to an older person or a priest – it can feel like they’re lecturing to you.”

Encouraging young people to experience a Mass is a good first step to bring them to the church, said Schwark. But it’s tradition that will ultimately make that initial seed of faith grow and flourish.

“Experience is a big thing. That would be a good draw, but ultimately you’re not going just for an experience,” she said. “God doesn’t want you to stay just because it feels good, but because it’s right and it’s true and it’s beautiful.”

-With files from Catholic News Service

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