



In a country with strong individualism many young adults are lonely and yearn for community. Do religious have something to offer?

Post-college young people frequently find themselves living in a city far away from family and established friends. Might religious communities reach out to these young people to share what they know about building relationships and forming community?

Community appeals to a lonely nation

“We have all known the long loneliness, and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”

—Dorothy Day

Many young adults today know about loneliness, and I believe they need community. Not long ago I was speaking at a Theology on Tap event in the Diocese of Joliet, Illinois. I drew a map of the United States on the board and asked the young people in the room to identify where their closest friends were on the map. Some indicated Illinois, but many more pointed all over the country, from Florida, to Massachusetts, Washington, and Texas. It seemed we covered every corner of America as we described our community of friends.

If any single visual sums up the current world of young adults, particularly college graduates, it is that U.S. map with marks representing dozens of friends. This is a generation marked by distance, both in geography and intimacy. If the information age has allowed young adults access to any data or facts they could hope for, it has also left them all too comfortable to remain there. Even more than that, having spent most of their lives jumping from one group to another, they lack many of the skills necessary to build strong, long-lasting communities

BY CRAIG GOULD



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PHOTO: NIKKY STEPHEN

Cultivating creative solitude is an important part of developing one's interior life. However, social isolation can be unhealthy, and observers of young adults say that religious communities have a wealth of communal wisdom to share with them.

that will sustain them in faith and life. This is why every young adult, considering a religious vocation or not, can benefit from the wisdom of the women and men who have spent centuries invested in the art of intimate community. Young people need the religious.

Desire for community

In the National Religious Vocation Conference study in 2009, most newer members of religious communities showed a strong preference for building community in their own institutes by living together with at least four other members. In fact younger members had such a strong preference for community that, "Findings from the survey of religious institutes suggest that new membership is negatively correlated with the number of members living alone. That is, the higher the number of members who live alone, the less likely an institute is to have new members." What this survey discovered is that young adults are desperately seeking women and men who will allow them to experience the depth of community that they are lacking.

It is necessary for those who grew up in a much different culture than exists today to offer a picture that will provide insight into why community is a greater need for this group of young adults than for prior ones. There was a time in American history when being Catholic was not simply a religious designation but a cultural one as well. Catholics lived in conclaves that could either be outlined by city blocks or country farms. These close-

knit, culturally homogenous groups all attended Catholic school together, and all received sacraments at the same Catholic parish. When they graduated from high school many of them would go on to get married to each other, have children together, and have their children baptized in the parish they had attended their whole lives. It was an insular, circular process that certainly had its failings but was successful in creating unity and a security to those inside.

The current collection of Catholic young adults, or Millennials (those born between 1980 and 2000) as they are often referred to, grew up in communities, and sometimes homes, that can best be described as fragmented. If they were not subject to the divorce of their own parents, they at least have been caught up in a society where they spent less time in integrated communities and more time in accomplishment-oriented events. The paradigm for today's youth has never been to build a strong community but to build a strong individual. From early on many youth are expected to finish high school, move on to college, and then move to a career. With the exact opposite narrative as many of their older relatives, young people are not only expected to leave their home community, but are actually groomed from early on to be able to do so. They participate in sports to achieve a scholarship, enroll in National Honor Society because it looks good on the college transcripts, and take advanced classes to shore up their ever-expanding application for college. They marry later, usually in their late 20s, and begin having children in their early 30s. The delay of these social

benchmarks that used to keep them invested in a specific community, and in particular the one they had come from, means that they are less connected to local civic engagement than previous generations.

Harvard Professor Robert Putnam's landmark book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, does a great job of detailing this phenomenon. Putnam uses the phrase "social capital" to measure the amount of time we spend investing—and being invested in—by a community of people we care for and who in turn care about us. His discovery of the decline in social capital is only reinforced by current social trends and media that prompt titles like *TIME* magazine's article, "Me, Me, Me, Generation." (May 20, 2013). This article details how the combination of instant connectivity through social networking and ever-accessible technology, such as smart phones, enables Millennials to share up-to-the-second details of their lives. Young adults, who already have a history of what David Elkind called the "imaginary audience," now find themselves with a stage on which to showcase themselves.

This hyper-social context has at least two effects on young adults. The first is that they become increasingly aware that they are able to control their own images, and more to the point, they decide what type of image of themselves they would like to portray. Young adults become savvy marketers and their lives are the brand. They no longer use social media as a window into their world, but instead it becomes a well constructed façade. And if the point of social media is no longer to simply connect socially but to craft a persona, then rarely do young people want to get too deep into the reality that the lives of most people are not some version of a Hollywood production studio but rather a day in, day out process of growing, changing, developing, and failing. The extravagant becomes the benchmark for what is worthy, which means the mundane day-to-day steadfastness either needs to be twisted to appear new and exciting, or young adults attempt to avoid a steadfast life at all costs.

The second effect is that many young adults have a lot of passing acquaintances and fewer developed friendships. On social networking young adults do share real and intimate details of their lives. They offer condolences and even empathy, often from hundreds of miles away. The problem becomes when Millennials begin to assume that these flashes of response constitute real intimacy. Friendship begins to lack the demands of participating in another's life and is instead measured by how many and what types of responses they receive through networking. The deeply developed human need to be cared

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for is met in quantity rather than quality. The constant connectivity leaves young adults struggling to be comfortable in their own silence and solitude. This leads to the interesting paradox where the most “plugged-in” generation in history also experiences what is probably the deepest and most profound loneliness in history.

Our concern here is what these insights mean for the church. In particular, how should men and women religious practice ministry to young adults? After all if community is not just a social component of all the faithful but a foundational theological principle, then the struggle of Millennials to engage with others in authentic, self-sacrificing relationships is a problem for the church. In fact it may be the most pressing issue facing all those seeking to minister to young adults. If parishes are constructed around parochial lines that no longer apply, and religious communities are built around the mutual gift of one person to another, then the fact that this generation has trouble developing and committing themselves to relationships could possibly leave the church ineffective in its message and ministry to this age group. It becomes not only a question of

how the church responds, but also, who in the church should respond.

Now is the moment to act

I contend that the time is right for religious communities to enter into the gap that exists between Millennials and the church, teaching the former how to build authentic community and the latter how to walk patiently with those whose formation is ongoing. Religious communities have spent centuries working out the struggles and gifts of intimacy. They hold unique insight into shared leadership, giftedness, service, and vows that are found almost nowhere else in society. They can be a sacrament of reconciliation and healing between the currently exhausted Millennials who long for community and the fulfillment that emerges only as a result of women and men who feel secure enough to give of themselves freely and deeply.

This would not be the first time that religious communities took up the task of revitalizing the faith community by sharing its wisdom. With the universal call to holiness the entire church was invited to put every hand to the plow. Lay women and men became full participants in the church’s works of mercy. Members of religious communities have become the mentors and skilled craftsmen to the apprenticeship of lay service.

In a similar fashion religious communities have often been on the forefront of crafting and developing the spiritual life of many of the church’s faithful. Either through spiritual direction, retreat houses, or liturgy of the hours, religious communities strengthen and develop women and men in Christ so that they are more able to achieve their own holiness and the holiness of the church. It is impossible to imagine what the spiritual life of the larger body of Christ would be like without these communities to contour its soul to Jesus.

Once again now, the church must turn to its wisdom holders and ask to be lead into the process of building community. In previous generations community was not a foreign concept to the women and men who chose religious life as a vocation. Much of the world experienced intense and extensive community through a lifetime of daily interactions with large families and neighboring friends. Without the means or the ability to distance themselves from their familiar settings, Christians understood thoroughly what type of commitments and lifestyle was necessary to build strong kinship.

The response to this need for community is not only a service to the church, but to religious communities

themselves. If religious can teach young adults how to develop a habit of community, then their own efforts in recruiting women and men for their own communities will be enhanced. After all for a young adult who longs for a group to belong to, yet struggles to know how to enter into such a group given their development in an individualistic culture, the prospect of moving into a collection of women and men marked by vows to each other can be daunting. If women and men religious can help the pilgrim church to develop its practice of communal life, then the women and men they invite to explore a vocation would require less formation in community living if and when they do enter an institute.

Decision making, conflict resolution, sharing of resources, and leadership

I propose four areas in which religious communities can have an impact on the deficit in community that Millennials are experiencing. They are: decision making, conflict resolution, resource sharing, and leadership. Currently decision making for the Millennials is an isolating experience. Though others may be available to offer an opinion, there are no designated processes for how to listen to others and allow their input to affect a decision. The development of “crowd-sourcing,” or seeking input from a massive, mostly online community for a question, is evidence of Millennials’ awareness of their own limits and need for guidance outside of themselves. In religious life there is usually a structure for making decisions that affect how each member spends time and does ministry. Millennials can learn from the fact that the community could have an authoritative say in what an individual does. They might learn, too, about how to gratefully accept input from others; it is a skill that Millennials need to practice but is often absent in their development.

Next, the culture at large is not good at resolving conflict. The current narrative is for a group to try and stack as many people as possible on their side of the aisle so that they can shout down or drown out the people on the other side of the aisle. Too rarely is compromise or dialogue a solution. Religious communities can share practices and ways of being together that promote mutual understanding. The ability to consider multiple perspectives is an essential task for living in religious communities, and it is a gift they could give to the current church.

A third way religious communities could have a great impact on Millennials is in teaching them how to share resources. Most young adults grew up in households where both property and materials had clearly

defined ownership boundaries. From bedrooms to vehicles, many of today’s Millennials don’t naturally envision having to share possessions, especially commonly used ones, with others. In fact the acquisition of personal possessions, like a car or a house, often signals an “advance” to adulthood in our society. Religious communities could help younger generations recapture the exercises of communal living. They could demonstrate how this sharing of resources actually allows the community, and the individual as part of that community, to thrive.

Finally, having grown up in close relationships with their parents, Millennials do not hold the anti-authoritarian views that characterized their Baby Boomer parents. Millennials are far more likely to be friends with their parents than to resent them. However that does not mean that they have an easy time with those in positions of leadership. On the contrary, having been reared on a pedagogy of group learning in schools, young adults often do not respond positively to situations in which leaders have been placed over them without their approval. In addition because of the focus on guarding their self-esteem as they matured, Millennials can struggle to openly accept criticism and receive it constructively. Religious communities switch leadership fairly often and are expected to show obedience to those in places of authority. Young adults would stand to gain a lot of insight and wisdom from the ways in which religious communities choose and exercise their leadership.

Every generation brings with it gifts to offer and needs to be met. Millennials are a gift to our church. They bring a sense of multiculturalism, mission, and enthusiasm to the Body of Christ. Yet they also have needs, and chief among them is how to be women and men who commit themselves to a habit of community. Few within the church are more equipped than the religious communities to teach Millennials the practices, skills, and beliefs necessary to achieve the intimacy they long for. Religious women and men have always been a gift to the church, and the church needs their wisdom and experience now more than ever. ■

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