

Identity, Belonging, Religious Community & the Dominican Order

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Introduction

The Millennial Generation (those born from the early 1980s to the late 2000s) are the future of society as well as of the Church. Now between the ages of 18 to 31, “they are relatively unattached to organized politics and religion, [they are] linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, in no rush to marry, and optimistic about the future” (Pew Research Center 2015b). Millennials represented 27% of the adult population in the United States in 2014 and 24% of that of the European Union in 2013 (Pew Research Center 2015b).

The Millennial Generation is the first generation to grow up in a society dominated by the Internet, personal computers and media technology. This new technology has shaped the identity and sense of belonging of this generation in both positive and negative ways. According to the research dissertation of Ingeborg Kjaerstad, *iGeneration or Generation Me? Identity Development with the Millennials* (2014), social media has allowed Millennials to shape their own personal identities and construct their individual spaces of belonging. They are able to express such identity better through social media than personal communication. Moreover, this same social media has created identity confusion due to the fact that social media tends to preserve many versions of oneself as well as maintain certain identities one has grown out of (Kjaerstad 2014). Thus the Millennial Generation struggles with self identity, “They are highly transient and are likely to have grown up in a transient, fluid family structure, without a defined set of religious practices. They resist labeling and dislike being categorized as ‘Millennials’ with all of the implications that suggests. With all of the world’s information on demand, at their fingertips, they experience

tremendous pressure to find meaning” (Outsight Network 2015:5).

Millennials seek “relational belonging” instead of traditional institutional affiliation: “They prefer to associate with ‘tribes’ where they feel welcomed and accepted for who they are” (Outsight Network 2015:5). At the same time, they search for active involvement and opportunities to make a real difference: “Millennials seek a sense of belonging first, then conform behaviors to the norms of the group before finally changing their belief systems. This contrasts sharply with older generations who join worship communities based on shared belief. This also confounds traditional church models, where the primary emphasis is on beliefs rather than action” (Outsight Network 2015:5).

Millennials tend to look especially inward for self-identity while also seeking self-expression – especially through social media – in which they “display and validate their identities, and seek and monitor the opinions of those they most care about – their friends, family and the people they follow online” (Newswire 2015):

Although some argue that online profiles and identities are manipulated and polished (Horan, 2010), and are a part of a performer’s front stage (Goffman, 1959), these formats of self-presentation may result in the Millennials finding a collective online identity. This can give a positive feeling of community, especially when they find themselves in an environment where they are the minority (Kjaerstad 2014).

Millennials do not find their identity in labels and belonging to traditional groups, “This generation prefers to embrace differences and to celebrate individuality and fluid identities” (Newswire 2015). Millennials are

individualistic who have been raised and educated to think for themselves, they are flexible and mobile, open minded and attach less importance to material goods. At the same time, they are socially conscious and civic minded, while paradoxically hyper-individualistic. In their individuality, “Millennials want to connect with like-minded people and confront the defining issues of our time and age” (Wiersum 2015). While searching for their own identity, they want to belong, improve their communities, and share with their peers (Wiersum 2015). Millennials seek at the same time mentors who are “authentic leaders who seek out and welcome their input, who appreciate them, and who involve them in meaningful ways” (Ousight Network 2015:5). Authentic relationships and leaders living authentic lives is what most important to them, “authentic imperfection is more important than perfect form” (Ousight Network 2015:5).

Religious Identity and Belonging of Millennials

For years, surveys have indicated that those belonging to the Millennial Generation in the United States are far less likely than other generations to identify with a religious group, thus becoming part of the so-called “nones” group, and this trend has increased significantly in recent years (Lipka 2015a). Although, as David Campbell, Director of the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy at the University of Notre Dame, states:

Most of the “nones” are what we might call soft secularists. Most do not describe themselves as atheists or agnostics, which suggests that they are not totally disaffected from all aspects of religion, or from a belief in a God or higher power. In other words, this suggests that many of the “nones” are not actively opposed or hostile to religion, and that some of them might even be attracted to a new form of religion (Masci 2015).

Research has also recognized a decline in the number of those who identify themselves as Catholics in the general U.S. popula-

tion (Pew Research Center 2015a). However, one-in-five register their primary religious affiliation as Roman Catholic, many being immigrant Hispanics (Lipka 2015b). Moreover, the National Religious Vocation Conference 2013’s *Vocations to Religious Life Fact Sheet* estimates that “as many as 350,000 never married men and 250,000 never married women have seriously considered becoming a priest, sister, or brother. Those of the Millennial Generation are even more likely than the generation before them to consider a vocation” (NRVC 2013). As Emma Green from *The Atlantic* writes,

The decision [to enter religious life] seems radical in the context of common stereotypes about Millennials, a generation often accused of lack of discipline, skepticism bordering on snark, preference for a hook-up culture, and only the vaguest spiritual impulses. These Millennials defy those clichés, taking lifelong vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to God (Green 2013).

According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University, the total number of Millennial priests ordained in the U.S. has been increasing slightly since 2012 (from 457 to 494 in 2013 and 508 in 2014) and expects the growth trend to continue in 2015 (Gautier and Gaunt 2015a). The same report indicated that in 2015 there was a total of 722 priests in the four American Dominican provinces. Although this number represents a 40% drop from the 1970s number of 1,199, the same trend in growth of national vocations is perceived in the Order, making it the third largest religious institute in the U.S. behind the Jesuits and the Franciscans (Gaunt and Gautier 2015b).

The 2010 Pew Research Center’s “Millennials, A Portrait of Generation Next: Confident. Connected. Open to Change” reports that “to a large extent, the things that Millennials value in life mirror the things older generations value” (Pew Research Center 2010:17). One of life’s priorities for older generations and Millennials is family. 52% answered that “being a good parent”, “having a

successful marriage” (30%), and “owning a home” (20%) were the most important thing in their lives. More pertinent to us was that 21% reported that “helping others in need” was more important than “being successful in a high-paying career” (15%), “having lots of free time” or “becoming famous” (1%); although, more worrying, only 15% answered that “living a very religious life” was the most important things in their lives, the same percentage as those who stated that “being successful in a high-paying career” was important to them (Pew Research Center 2010:18).

Although, overall, Millennials are considerably less religious than older Americans, Millennials remain fairly traditional in their religious beliefs and practices (Pew Research Center 2010:85). Though they pray less than older generations do today, the number of Millennials who say they pray everyday is much higher than the percentage of what older people report when they were of a similar age (Pew Research Center 2010:85). The same can be said on their belief in God as well as their belief in absolute standards of right and wrong (Pew Research Center 2010:85). “This suggests that some of the religious differences between younger and older Americans today are not entirely generational but result in part from people’s tendency to place greater emphasis on religion as they age” (Pew Research Center 2010:85).

While Millennials are less likely to belong to a particular church, among Protestants who do belong to a church group, they tend to attend religious services weekly with the same frequency as their older counterparts. This is not the case in the Catholic Church where only 34% of Millennials attend weekly Mass whereas 43% of the older generation attend Mass weekly (Pew Research Center 2010:90).

Why Would a Millennial Find Identity and Belonging in Religious Life?

According to the 2009 report, *Recent Vocations to Religious Life*, 78% of Millennials entered religious life primarily as a response to “a sense of call to religious life”,

73% due to a yearning for prayer and spiritual growth, 67% because of “a desire to be of service” to their fellow human beings, 60% because of “a desire to be part of a community”, and 44% chose religious life “to be more committed to the Church” (Bendyna and Gautier 2009:53).

More than anything else, 85% became part of a specific religious institute because their fellow religious manifested “a sense of joy, a down-to-earth nature, and commitment and zeal”; 66% were attracted to the spirituality of the particular institute, while 60% said the community life and mission of an institute influenced their decision to join (Bendyna and Gautier 2009:56). 59% sought the prayer life of a particular institute, 57% signed up because of the welcome and encouragement of its members, 51% did so for the wide range of ministry opportunities, 47% due to the institute’s fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church, 42% were inspired by the life and works of the founder, and 35% due to a personal invitation by a member of the religious institute (Bendyna and Gautier 2009:56). Again, according to the same report, 55% of Millennials entered a particular institute swayed by the lifestyle of its members (Bendyna and Gautier 2009:71).

46% reported that their decision to enter their institute was influenced by its practice regarding a religious habit, considerable generational difference between the Millennial Generation and the Vatican II Generation (those born between 1943 and 1960 or the Baby Boomers – those born between 1941 and 1964) (Bendyna and Gautier 2009:71). “I will wear a habit – that’s my choice,” said Toni Garrett, who, at 31, was about to enter the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in 2013 and had recently been vice president at a Bank of America in Dallas, Texas, and who for the past year had been working for the convent. “[The habit] is attractive to me because I think that I need it. We have sisters who entered the convent at 14, at 18, and have been sisters for 40, 50, 60 years. I’ve lived a pretty good portion of my life not in this way.

For me, a habit is like a healthy reminder of who I've chosen to be" (Green 2013).69% belong to institutes that wear a habit (Bendyna and Gautier 2009:93).

Regarding aspects of community life, 87% considered praying together with fellow religious as very important, 83% considered living together with members of their own religious institute and sharing meals together (82%), having communal recreation (72%), and working together with members of the same religious institute (66%) as very important (Bendyna and Gautier 2009:81). Asked about preferences for living arrangements, 50% prefer to live in large (eight or more) communities and 45% preferred to live in medium-sized (four to seven) communities.54% prefer to live only with other members of their institute, while 65% of Millennials expressed a strong preference for living with members of their institute in large community settings. 62% preferred to live with members of different ages and 49% with members of different cultures (Bendyna and Gautier 2009:84).

When asked about preferences for ministry settings, 84% of Millennials, 73% of the Post-Vatican II Generation, 72% of the Pre-Vatican II Generation, and 54% of the Vatican II Generation indicate a relatively strong preference for ministry with other members of their institute and ministry sponsored by their institute (72% of Millennials, 68% of the Post-Vatican II, 58% of the Pre-Vatican II, and 46% of the Vatican II Generation) (Bendyna and Gautier 2009:86-87). When asked what they find most rewarding or satisfying about religious life,

New members [viz, Millennials] offered a range of comments about various aspects of religious life. The most frequent responses were about the communal dimension of religious life. Some mention living, praying, and working together while others focus more on the sense of common purpose and being part of something larger than themselves. The frequency of mentions of community life suggests that this is a particularly

important aspect of religious life to most new members (Bendyna and Gautier 2009:97-102).

Many of these new members also identify some aspect of the spiritual dimension of religious life, such as the sense of following God's call, deepening their relationship with God and with Christ, and/or personal and communal prayer, as providing the greatest sense of reward or satisfaction. Some new Millennial members cite the service or outreach dimension of religious life as most rewarding or satisfying for them: "I am a Millennial, through and through," said Sister Colleen Gibson, a 27-year-old in the second year of her formal training with the Sisters of St. Joseph in Philadelphia, "There's a hunger within people for intentional living and intentional community... that crosses bounds. I don't see myself as turning my back on my generation. In bringing faith back to my generation and sharing it with people... It's trying to be in the culture, but not necessarily of the culture" (Green 2013).

Identity, Belonging, Millennials and the Dominican Order

The Dominicans self-identify as a worldwide Family to which belong men and women who follow Dominic's vision as friars, sisters, nuns, lay Dominicans and associates in over 100 countries dedicated to community, prayer, study, and the ministry of the Word, the so-called "Four Pillars of Dominican Life".

Millennials, although avoiding traditional institutional affiliations, seek "relational belonging" (Outsight Network 2015:5). They seek out groups where they feel welcomed and accepted. While searching for their own identity, they desire to belong, to improve their communities, to share with their peers and to "connect with like-minded people" as they "confront the defining issues of our time and age" (Wiersum 2015). For Dominicans, the "basic idea of community is not just people living together under one roof. Rather, community living is about the willingness to share our lives with one another" (Dominican 2015).The communal dimension

of Dominican life challenges all its members to be of “one mind and one heart in God” (Acts 4:32). The Dominican habit, required in most provinces, can be for the Millennial in particular “a healthy reminder of who [they’ve] chosen to be” (Green 2013).

It was St. Dominic’s desire to imitate the apostolic poverty of Jesus and the early Church, so “we call nothing our own” (Dominican 2015). The vow of poverty calls Dominicans to live a simple life, free from the need to possess many things. Millennials too attach less importance to material goods than previous generations (Pew Research Center 2010:18).

Although Millennials value family as the most important thing in their lives, the vow of chastity taken by the members of the Order is a deliberate choice not to limit their life to a spouse and family, but to allow themselves to be witnesses to the unlimited love of God and free themselves to “embrace differences and to celebrate individuality and fluid identities” (Wiersum 2015) as Millennials are already inclined to do in their desire to connect and communicate.

Perhaps the vow of obedience, which puts the Dominican at the service of the Church, free from the need to always have the last word about what they will do and where they will live, will be the most challenging to Millennials (Dominican 2015). However, Millennials do seek out mentors who are “authentic leaders who seek out and welcome their input, who appreciate them, and who involve them in meaningful ways” (Outsight Network 2015:5). A more dialogical obedience would have to be emphasized in the Order, although its traditional democratic and chapter form of government serves as a strong foundation for this kind of obedience.

Millennials look inward for self-identity, which would open them up to the life of prayer. Many Millennial religious declared that deepening their relationship with God and personal or communal prayer provided the greatest sense of satisfaction (Bendyana and Gautier 2009:86-87). In fact, Dominicans cen-

ter their lives on God and celebrate God in daily common prayer, meditation, study, and the proclamation of the Gospel (Dominican 2015).

Millennials are the most educated generation, hence the intellectual tradition of the Order would very much appeal to them, who have been raised and educated to think for themselves and are open minded as the great St. Thomas Aquinas was during his lifetime. St. Dominic made study an essential part of the “Sacred Preaching”.”The primary object of Dominican study is the Word of God, revealed through Scripture and Tradition and interpreted authoritatively by the Church’s Magisterium, and whose fullest manifestation is the very Person of Christ Himself” (Dominican 2015). All these are elements sought by Millennials looking for meaning in their lives.

The Dominican Order’s common life, study, prayer, and proclamation of the Word touches upon many of the needs of identity, belonging and meaning felt by the Millennial Generation. Although the Order might not be perfect in living out all of its pillars, for the Millennial “authentic imperfection is more important than perfect form” (Outsight Network 2015:5).

Conclusion

Millennials are looking for identity and belonging in an “authentic community that’s marked by mutual help, mutual encouragement, knowing Christ deeply and in reality, and expressing His love and power collectively” (Viola 2015). Religious institutes are more likely to attract newer members if they have a strong Catholic identity, if they are hopeful about their future, if their members live together in community, if they wear a habit, and if they have a structured prayer life. Although newer members desire ministry, their primary reasons for coming to religious life are a sense of call, a desire to deepen their prayer and spiritual life, and a desire to live with others who share their faith and values. The Dominican Order can be a space where a Millennial can find and strengthen his or her true identity

and sense of belonging through a relationship with Christ which grows daily, a community life that aids him or her in living the vows and growth in holiness, and an apostolate that consists in sharing with others the fruits of that journey in search of ultimate meaning and purpose.

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