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Gray heads in church no reason to cluck

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Analysis

American Catholics are a diverse bunch, but one thing most share is a prejudice in favor of youth. From the staunchest traditionalist to the furthest-out liberal, when Catholics walk into a gathering composed disproportionately of gray heads, they cluck and fret, while a room full of kids gladdens hearts.

Given Western demographics these days, Catholics will either have to rethink that bias or resign themselves to an awful lot of clucking and fretting.

A reminder came in early August, with release of the 2010 ?World Population Data Sheet? by the Washington-based Population Reference Bureau. It confirmed an already well-documented reality, which is that affluent nations today are aging faster than any previous society in human history. In Europe, Canada, and developed Asian societies such as Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, that?s a result of increasing longevity and abysmally low birth rates. In the United States (where birth rates remain somewhat higher), aging is also driven by the fact that baby boomers are moving into their golden years.

A few factoids make the case:

- For the first time in history, the number of people on earth aged 65 and over will soon exceed the number of children under 5.
- Nearly 40 million Americans today are 65-plus, greater than the combined populations of New York, London and Moscow. By 2050, the 65-plus total will soar to over 80 million.
- Every eight seconds in the United States today, a baby boomer turns 65.

These trends cause policy wonks to fret about how the West will afford pensions and health care, especially as the ratio of workers to retired persons shrinks from 4-to-1 (the level analysts say is ideal) to 3-to-1 (the projection for the United States by 2050), or 2-to-1 (Canada and Europe), or even 1-to-1 (Japan). Catholics ought to worry too, because when public safety nets break down and elder care isn?t available in the family, faith communities will be pressed to step into the gap.

Yet seen through American Catholic eyes, the ?grayby boom? ought to be a source of excitement as well as anxiety, because whatever social strains it may create, rapid aging also heralds a potentially massive religious renaissance.

Here?s why: The 65-plus cohort is, by any measure, the most religious segment of the American population. A recent Pew study found that just 27 percent of U.S. adults 18-34 describe themselves as ?religious,? as opposed to a robust 47 percent of those 65 and older. A *U.S. News and World Report*/PBS Religion and Ethics Newsweekly survey in 2002 concluded that 60 percent of those 65-plus attend religious services at least once a week, compared to just 34 percent of those aged 25-34.

To be sure, turning 65 does not magically make someone religious. The current crop of elderly Americans is more religious partly because that?s how they were raised, and it?s not clear how future generations will turn out. Nevertheless, it?s also a consistent sociological finding that someone marginally open to religion at 35 will be much more actively religious at 65. Researchers say that an uptick in both prayer and attending religious services begins in the early 30s with such people, and builds as they age.

In other words, the ?core market? for religion in America, the segment of the population most inclined both to believe and to belong, is about to explode.

Linda Nazareth?s recent book, *The Leisure Economy: How Changing Demographics, Economics, and Generational Attitudes Will Reshape Our Lives and Our Industries*, sketches the commercial implications of rapid aging, arguing that businesses catering to people with time on their hands will do well over the next half-century. She points to the American Time Use Survey, which reports that an American adult aged 45-54 has an average 4.5 hours of ?leisure time? each day, meaning waking time that?s not economically productive, while those 65 and older enjoy 7.3 hours of leisure. Do the math: As the 65-plus population swells from 34.7 million to 75.9 million in 2050, that?s an extra 115 million hours of leisure time rolling through American society every day.

What?s more, improvements in general health mean the elderly can put their leisure time to good use. Three in four persons aged 65-74 in the United States, and two in three of those over 75, say their health is ?good to excellent.? They also have the means: The advertising firm Martino and Binzer, which specializes in ?mature marketing,? estimates that Americans over 55 possess $1.5 trillion in discretionary spending.

A defining evangelical question for Catholicism in America is thus the following: What share of those extra 115 million hours of time will the Catholic church capture for its soup kitchens, prayer groups, adult faith formation programs, and so on? Will the country?s swelling elderly population feel welcome in Catholic venues, or will they take their religious business someplace else?

The answer may depend on the church?s ability to foster a ?gray-friendly? consciousness.

Parishes, for example, can ensure that structures are accessible to the disabled, and that transportation programs are available for senior citizens. Activities that cater to young adults often start at 7 p.m. or later, on the theory that by this hour, participants will have returned home from work, taken care of their kids, and had dinner. Senior citizens, however, might be more comfortable with events that begin in the early afternoon.

None of this means Catholicism should abandon the young, but it does imply a Copernican shift in attitudes toward gray heads. If someone were to dream up a program to pull millions of marginal Catholics into a more active practice of the faith, it would be hailed as one of the great evangelical success stories of all time. Today, the demographics of aging are to some extent doing the job all by themselves -- if the Catholic church in America has the pastoral imagination to make those elderly believers feel like they belong.

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