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The puzzle of 20-somethings

Alice Popovici | Feb. 11, 2011

Audience members listen to a panel discussion Jan. 29 during the "Lost? Twenty-Somethings and the Church" conference at Fordham University in New York. (Ken Levinson)

NEW YORK -- As Jennifer Sawyer prepared the remarks she was to deliver on Jan. 29 at a Fordham University conference titled ?Lost? Twenty-Somethings and the Church,? she Googled ?spiritual but not religious? -- a phrase she said many of her friends use to describe themselves -- and discovered an entire Web site dedicated to the idea of seeking faith on one?s own terms. What this brought into focus for Sawyer, a 23-year-old production assistant who divides her time between three New York City parishes, was that people are looking for a spiritual connection, but not necessarily finding it within the walls of the church.

?People have difficulties trying to have a relationship with something that doesn?t seem to understand them,? Sawyer said at the conference, ?especially when everybody seems to be talking about us, and not to us.?

In relating the experiences of her peers, she sketched out a profile of her generation, describing a colleague who feels so alienated by the church?s views on homosexuality that he has stopped going to church, another discouraged by what she views as the inferior role of women in the church, and others ?so overwhelmed by personal hardships and financial difficulties that they find it nearly impossible to find God.?

Sawyer?s remarks, delivered early on the second day of the event (following a forum on the evening of Jan. 28) became a backdrop for the conversation that unfolded throughout the day, unpacking and dissecting the puzzle of 20-somethings: Why are they apparently indifferent to religion? What are they seeking, and finding, in the hookup culture so prevalent on college campuses? And how will the church reach out across the generational divide -- competing with social media and scores of other distractions -- to bring them back into its fold?

They came for a variety of reasons -- some seeking, some willing to guide, and others just hoping to learn -- filling an auditorium of a few hundred seats on Fordham?s Lincoln Center Campus, with the overflow spilling into an adjacent building. Many attendees were in their 20s, and many in their 60s and beyond, but the majority fell somewhere in the middle. Even though the conversation didn?t include everyone -- as many pointed out throughout the day, minorities were underrepresented in the panels and barely present in the audience -- people seemed pleased that it was taking place at all.

One woman said she came to the conference out of concern for her 22-year-old grandson. A group of theology students traveled from Boston to learn and take part in the conversation. And a 25-year-old woman said she came because she was once ?lost,? but had found her way back to the church after successive car and bike accidents.

S. Susan Wilcox, director of campus ministry at St. Joseph?s College in Brooklyn, said she meets many students who categorize themselves as Catholic, but they do not pray or attend Mass. They are trying to figure out how ?being Catholic? fits into their identity, but often do not know how to articulate the question.

Stephanie Almozara, a 27-year-old teacher from New Jersey, said she was excited to receive an e-mail from Fordham about the conference, ?just excited for the fact that there was gonna be a dialogue.? Since moving to the area a year and a half ago, Almozara said she has had a hard time finding a parish where she feels at home. ?Since I am not married and with a child, I don?t exactly feel that the church is welcoming me,? she said. ?I?m looking for a community that is beyond liturgy.?

It seems that other young people are searching for the same thing. In a video produced by Sawyer and another panelist, Paul Schutz, and shown at the conference, one young man said he doesn?t see many single young people taking part in church life.

?You go to church and everyone?s three times your age, or they?re all parents with little kids,? he said in the video. ?Where?s that middle ground, where it?s like, young people still figuring it out? Where are they represented??

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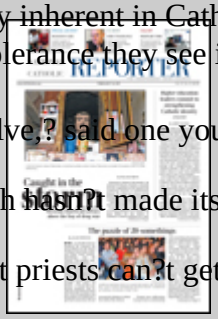

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The video?s impromptu interviews with young Catholics, and those who once were Catholic, were culled from the streets and bars of the city, as Sawyer and Schutz stopped strangers to ask about their views on the Catholic church. The answers began to form a pattern. Even though the young men and women polled in the video ranged from nominal religious to non-practicing to atheist, a few key issues seemed to resonate among them: They enjoy the sense of community inherent in Catholicism; they respect its commitment to social justice; and they are put off by the lack of tolerance they see in a church hierarchy they described as ?hypocritical,? ?arrogant? and ?rigid.?

?The church's stances need to evolve,? said one young man.

?I think, in a lot of ways, the church hasn?t made itself relevant,? said another.

?I have a problem with the fact that priests can?t get married,? said a young woman.

From what Sawyer said she has seen, being Catholic has become, to young people, something of a ?taboo subject.? One friend, perhaps wary of others? reactions, describes herself as a ?closeted Catholic.? When people think of the Catholic church, Sawyer told the audience, they think of the negative associations of intolerance and rigidity, ?and they put all of these things above the beauty of the faith, above the real idea of openness and love and solidarity.?

Reflecting later on the conference, Sawyer, who was raised Catholic and attended Catholic schools all her life, said she found a deeper meaning in her faith during her freshman year at Fordham, even as many of her peers began to grow away from the church. ?I always say, ?That?s when I found my personal spirituality,? ? she said, explaining that the Ignatian spirituality she discovered at Fordham inspired her to look for God in all things -- in conversations, in relationships with people, even in yoga class.

She remembered one of the first Masses she attended at University Church on the Bronx Campus, where the combination of uplifting music and the welcoming congregation made her think, ?Maybe this is something more than I?ve been experiencing,? she said.

Sawyer, who calls herself ?somewhat of a church shopper,? now divides her Sundays between three different churches: She goes to the Church of the Ascension on West 107th Street for the diversity in the congregation and the jazz Masses; she goes to the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola on East 84th Street for its music and because it is closer to her home in Queens; and to the Church of St. Paul the Apostle on West 59th Street for its young adult group and service-oriented events.

?I really liked what Joe Nuzzi had to say,? Sawyer remembered, flipping through her notes from the conference. ?One of the things that struck a chord with me, and with a lot of the people there is that people will never tolerate feeling excluded.?

Joseph Nuzzi, pastoral associate in charge of young adult ministry at St. Francis of Assisi in New York, had begun his remarks by addressing an earlier question: ?Are 20-something-year-olds seeking at all?? A fair question to ask, he added.

?I firmly believe that the human being has not changed in the last 20 years. Our technology has changed, our rules of communication, the pressures and stresses we?re under might have changed somewhat,? Nuzzi said. ?But I do think they [young people] will be seeking what, I think -- Aristotle was right -- we?re all seeking, which is happiness.?

And getting there from here will have to involve retooling the church -- and possibly a good ad campaign, he continued, drawing laughter from the audience.

?Folks, let?s face it -- most of the time people drift away from the church because when they?re there they?re not inspired,? he said. Young people need to feel welcomed into the church. ?We can no longer sit back and just expect people to be guilted into the church. It?s also a lot of fun to build up a community.?

Speaking a few days after the conference, Christine Firer Hinze, director of Fordham?s Francis and Ann Curran Center for American Catholic Studies and one of the event organizers, said she was pleased with the outcome of the discussion, which she hopes will continue online and in future forums.

And she was glad so many people appreciated the intentional wordplay in the title of the conference.

?If anyone?s lost, who is it?? she asked. ?Is it, perhaps, the institution that?s lost its way in terms of ministering to these groups? Maybe nobody?s lost.?

[Alice Popovici is a freelance writer based in New York and a frequent contributor to *NCR*.]

Editor's Note: An earlier version of this article identified the wrong the Church of the Ascension. Jennifer Sawyer attends the Church of the Ascension on West 107th Street.

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