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Beads, bells and belief

Jamie Manson | Jan. 15, 2009

Every few months, I pay a visit to the East West Bookstore, which sits ensconced on an especially tony stretch of 5th Avenue, perfectly situated on the periphery of Manhattan's Union Square and West Village neighborhoods.

The store is aptly named. It offers a chic, two-level emporium of Eastern spirituality's finest smells, bells, and talismans. Strands of prayer beads, rows of holy cards, collections of statues and piles of incense line the shelves. Books with cover photos of monks garbed in elegant, flowing robes spin around on a rack. A young woman asks a sales person for assistance with selecting a crystal that will aid her in recovering from the pain of a bad break-up.

With each trip, I become increasingly convinced that if I were to skew my five senses just a bit, I could easily be in any old Catholic religious goods store (minus the chic). And with that thought, I always get a twinge of anger, because I witness once again what a profound opportunity that the church is missing with my generation.

Too often, young adults fall victim to a blame game perpetuated by the church, which insists that we have been so seduced by secular culture, the result has been a decrease in vocations, the closing of parishes, and the general demise of society's moral structure.

Yet, when I visit East West, I find no lack of young adults yearning to make meaning of theirs lives, to seek comfort for their fears and healing for their sufferings. Now more than ever, they are seeking out some form of consistency and community, which seem to be rapidly vanishing from the fabric of our lives in the Western world. They are searching for a metaphysical narrative to ground their lives and their actions, a set of fundamental beliefs that would help inform their relationships and the ways in which they raise their children.

The church faces a particular challenge with young adults. Many of us are unchurched, because our parents chose not to raise us in the church of their childhood. But for those of us who were raised in the tradition, we grew up in a church that did not have the formative power that it has had throughout history. We were not forced, through fear and guilt, into believing that beads, statues, prayers and rituals held the power to decide the states of our souls and our fates in the afterlife. Yet, this lack of formation also presents a real opportunity for the church. My generation would be the first to willing *choose* church, to choose to live in an intentional Christian community out of a genuine desire.

What church authorities still refuse to recognize is that they cannot rely on the medieval tactics of spiritual coercion and shame to bring us into the pews. Instead, young adults have to be met where they are, to be engaged in a dialogue about the larger questions of their lives. We have to be addressed as mature, thinking adults, because we simply do not feel compelled to go to church in the way that previous generations do.

The symbols of the church do not speak to my generation the way it speaks to the generations that preceded us. Rosaries, statues of Mary and images of the saints, are subject to much ridicule, and crosses have become more recognizable as a fashion statement than as a reminder of the living, bleeding God who was killed in an effort in

reach out to us. But perhaps this is more a result of church's unwillingness to risk breathing new, creative life into these sacramentals. What really is the difference between grasping at rosaries versus Buddhist prayer beads? Aren't both of these actions, at their heart, the movements of vulnerable human beings seeking some sense of peace, some discipline of prayer, some tangible feeling of comfort amid so much of life's chaos, sadness and uncertainty?

The Christian mystical tradition and the Catholic notion of sacrament could offer so much to quell the longings of young adults. But, sadly, the only identification that they make with Christianity today is with biblical fundamentalism and a strange caricature of Jesus. They identify Catholicism with moralistic repression, and a group of disconnected men who are uninterested in listening to the experiences or questions of the laity, most especially its female, LGBT, and divorced members.

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There is such a richness of ideas and beliefs that have come out of the Catholic tradition that would do much to help young adults find the sacred in their everyday lives. Even on my most trying days as a Catholic, the sacramental lens through which we view the world keeps me connected to what I believe is the profoundest reality of Catholic identity. Through this lens we see the grace of God working through all of nature to reach out to us, to perfect us, and to help us become fully realized in the goodness of our humanity. It is the sacramental worldview that allowed Catholicism to give birth to figures such as Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and Teilhard de Chardin. The activist, the mystic and the scientist were all deeply grounded in the Catholic belief that there is no limit to the ways in which God reveals Godself to us, whether it is through the broken man in the gutter, the power of contemplative prayer, or the unfolding of the cosmos.

The people in my generation have been abandoned during a time unprecedented spiritual hunger, having grown up in a period when the rate of divorce skyrocketed, the effects of technology separated us from family and neighbors, and a frenetic busyness took control of our day to day activities. The young people who seek out spiritual materials like those sold at East West are already participating in sacramental life and are not even aware of it. They are reaching out to the tangible things of nature in a poignant struggle to find grace. How much fuller would our experience be if the church ceased to focus strictly on the ways in which we ought to order our existence, and instead guided us in finding the innumerable ways in which God breaks through to us in our ordinary lives.

(Jamie Manson received her master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology, personal commitments and sexual ethics with Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley. She is the former editor in chief of the Yale magazine Reflections, and currently serves as director of Social Justice Ministries at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, working primarily with New York City?s homeless and poor populations. She is a member of the national board of the Women?s Ordination Conference.)

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