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Four themes to help young Catholics retain their beliefs

Robert Christian | Aug. 27, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Editor's note: Michael Sean Winters is on vacation this week. Filling in for him is Robert Christian, editor of Millennial [1], *a journal featuring the writing of millennial Catholics. He is a doctoral candidate in politics at The Catholic University of America and a graduate fellow at the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies. Winters will be back next week.*

When I was in eighth grade, I was among the most devout students in the class, yet religion was among my least favorite subjects. It was full of rote memorization and tedious, mind-numbing busy work. There was no effort to help us transition into a more adult faith, to learn about the church's rich social teachings or to foster real spiritual and emotional growth. It therefore does not surprise me when I see that very few of my fellow classmates are still Catholic today. They were presented with a religion that teaches you to be nice and respectable, that offers simple platitudes in a complex world, and that has attending church once a week as its primary requirement. It's not surprising they did not find this muted, dreary version of Catholicism appealing.

So when I taught eighth-grade religion, I was determined to take an entirely different approach. My goal was not to have my students memorize every prayer ever uttered, nor did I fret over them being able to regurgitate the one-sentence definitions of bold terms like "faith" or "love" found in their books. I wanted them to know what it meant to have faith and hope, to be loving and courageous, to seek wisdom and temperance, and to work for justice. More importantly, I wanted them to desire these, to embrace them. I wanted them to believe in the virtues and the other truths of Catholicism. I wanted to help them transition into an adult Catholic faith that would be durable, equipped to take on the challenges of the secular world, and satisfying in the most fundamental way. I cared less about the curriculum and more about their souls.

It has been fulfilling to see many of my former students retain their religious beliefs as they head back to school as college sophomores, despite growing up in the relatively secular atmosphere of Silicon Valley. I certainly cannot claim all the credit, but I like to think that the core messages of the class I taught helped. And as I assisted in confirmation preparation at my parish last year, I often returned to certain key ideas.

I did not invent these themes, but they are often overlooked -- or at least, they were until this year. There is so much about Pope Francis' papacy that excites and inspires me, but I'm especially grateful for some of the key themes that have appeared over and over again in both his words and his actions, themes that are especially appealing to young people and closely align with the core themes of the class I taught.

First, being a Christian means being a radical. Christianity does not promise a life of comfort and ease. It's not a religion for people who want to immerse themselves in our culture -- in consumerism, selfish ambition and every other bourgeois value -- and only break from that consensus at the margins. It is not a religion for people who are comfortable with the status quo. It demands more. It demands an extraordinary commitment to love: not the fleeting emotion but the force that can transform lives in both simple acts and by reimagining and recreating the world in which we live. It should shape everything from the way one interacts with a cashier to how one views global politics and justice.

It leads one to find debilitating poverty more offensive than harmless profanity. It inspires one to be daring and, as Pope Francis has said, to "swim against the tide." There will inevitably be resistance. And the Christian concern for everyone, including the weak and vulnerable, can lead to the experience of pain and suffering in a world with far too much injustice. Pope Francis highlighted this last week when he wrote [2], "We cannot sleep peacefully while babies are dying of hunger and the elderly are without medical assistance." Yet it offers a life of vitality, a sense of mission and purpose, and a vision of human flourishing.

Second, virtue and joy are deeply connected. Being a Christian does not mean being dour or aloof. The way of Christ brings meaning; it incites passion; it generates joy. Pope Francis has said [3] "there is no holiness in sadness," and joy has been a theme throughout his papacy.

Pope Francis has cautioned against the ephemeral "idols which take the place of God and appear to offer hope: money, success, power, pleasure," but that cannot fill the emptiness and loneliness that make them appealing. A life spent trying to run away from boredom is inevitably a life of drudgery. Pope Francis locates true joy not in material things, but in our encounter and relations with others, in relationships rooted in acceptance, understanding and love.

Now when the Christian experiences loss, conflict or failure, he or she won't entirely escape sadness, but faith opens the possibility of redemption, restoration and communion. In a culture where people seem obsessed with happiness yet are constantly lured away from that destination by false paths, the true path to joy can still be found in love and the God of love.

Third, religion is 24/7 year-round. Our commitment to Christ should permeate our actions. It should define who we are. It is not an activity to be fulfilled for an hour each Sunday. Pope Francis drove home this very message last week, emphasizing [4] that we can't be part-time Christians and that "to live the faith is not to decorate life with a little religion, like a cake is decorated with a little frosting." Most young teens see going to Mass each Sunday as the pre-eminent responsibility of a Catholic. It is important to let them know that this is simply not enough. This is not the standard for being a good Christian. So many young people have already turned away from organized religion because of the obnoxious hypocrisy they have witnessed from those who spend every Sunday in the pews and the rest of the week acting unethically, seemingly without any compunction.

Mass is important. My life crumbles without the Eucharist. But following Christ means embracing joy. It means the radical embrace of countercultural values. It places demands on one's entire existence. Religiosity and spirituality are fused together and inseparable when pursued authentically. This message is critical because we don't want the next generation of Catholics split between those who are "spiritual but not religious" and those who are "religious but not spiritual."

Finally, keep it real. Pope Francis has quickly become widely admired, even among non-Catholics, and perhaps his greatest appeal is his authenticity. He not only talks about setting aside the illusory and superficial, but seems to live this out in his daily life. The message is simple: Be your authentic self. You are an entirely unique person with immeasurable worth and value, not some cardboard cutout. Your real identity is shaped by your character and core, your authentic personality, not all the superficial things that distract us and take us away from who were meant to be. Our lives should not be shaped by the expectations and judgments of others, but our commitment to the values we rightly hold dear.

Our relationships should be as authentic as we are. Our culture despises dependency and idolizes autonomy. The cult of individualism makes authentic relationships difficult to achieve and sustain. Yet these relationships allow us to experience real joy and love, a priceless treasure that many carelessly discard or ignore. They make us vulnerable and exposed because they reveal our core being. But only in this state can we connect in the most fundamental and intimate way.

I believe Pope Francis is changing the face of Catholicism in the eyes of a younger generation. These themes -- authenticity, joy, being a radical, and rejecting part-time Christianity -- I consider to be among the most appealing, given my own experience as a teacher. But the real success of Francis' project can only be achieved if we all join him in living this way and integrating these messages into our interactions with others. After all, as another Francis reminds us, we are all called to preach the Gospel and even to use words if necessary.

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