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Gerard Gallagher

Millennial
Matters

*– Reconnecting the
Disconnected*

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– *Reconnecting the Disconnected*

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Recently I have had the opportunity to reconnect with people that I've met over the years. In turn this led me to revisit places that mean something special to me and review some programmes that I was part of. Overall whilst nostalgic it also alerted me to the reality that many people active in ministry are busy maintaining structures and systems that have less relevance to the faith needs of emerging generations. Somewhere in all the cultural changes in Ireland in the last twenty years, we forgot to understand and listen to those who belong to what sociologists call Generation X and the Millennials.

If we look at the those who have been born since the 1960s, this encompasses a cross-section of all strands of community life in Ireland. This period also covers the most rapid period of social change in modern times. We have moved from the Post-Vatican II years of the 60s and 70s to a period of modern memorial where we remember anniversaries in the Church of parishes being built in the 1850s onwards or the birth of a nation. Whilst it is important to remember, it really doesn't matter to recent generations who have become more individualistic and separated from the emotions of statehood or Church. Catholic Ireland for many has disappeared. Some people haven't noticed its disappearance.

Younger generations, those aged under fifty are more inclined to go to Costa for coffee or concerts than to Church. Where their parents joined parish groups, emerging generations join communities in their local gym, a bookclub or online. Few join faith based groups. Their world is one that outwardly is fast paced and deals with here and now. They have no nostalgia for history. They have no emotional attachment to Church. They are detached and disconnected. The values of Church for many of them are not

Gerard Gallagher lives in Two-Mile-House Parish, Co. Kildare. He is married with three children and is author of *Are We Losing the Young Church?*, Columba Press, 2005, *Your Child's Confirmation*, Redemptorist Publications, 2012.

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shared. They have a cultural attachment to the Church and not one of commitment that previous generations demonstrated. Younger generations and the Church are disconnected. They inhabit different worlds. A colleague of mine refers to these people as the *mosaic generation*, where every person is unique and appears to show a different feature.

GENERATION X

Anyone born since the 1960s onward to around 1980 is part of what's referred to as *Generation X*. Most of this group are aged 50 or younger. It's the generation that embraced new forms of freedom. Popular culture and social change significantly influenced them. They enjoyed being rebellious in challenging the old order. Nothing was sacred. Marriage and divorce, birth control and a sexual revolution and new forms of liberation from their parents and institutions all became hot topics for social debate. Often referred to as the MTV generation where their friends became more important than family. Media became more influential in their lives. It is the generation that had to come to terms with HIV and Aids. It was Generation X that also had a social conscience portrayed through Live Aid.

In Ireland, almost all this group are people who have grown up in a Church shaped by the theology and pastoral renewal of the Second Vatican Council. Many are parents or even grandparents. A few of them are bishops and many of our younger priests from this group are now emerging to take responsibility for shaping the Church for the future. Some struggle with the anxiety that somewhere on this path the faith and Church that they continue to follow, are not something that their younger families take seriously. Let me introduce *The Millennials*.

THE MILLENNIALS

The generation after this born in the 1980s onwards to the present are often referred to as *The Millennials*. This generation is representative of many young adults in society today. Born sometime between the 1980s and 1990s, many came of age in the years after 2000. *Time Magazine* has referred to this generation as ME, ME, ME.¹

Millennials are a highly qualified and educated group. There are also culturally diverse and form part of the movement of equality in all parts of social life and integration. In the USA, they were the largest demographic group that did not vote either for Trump

1 Stein, Joel (20 May 2013). "*Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation*". *TIME*. Retrieved 14 October 2016

or Clinton. In the UK, they were the largest group that supported the Vote to stay in the EU. In Ireland, they led the campaign for marriage equality in 2015. In the Western world, they are the least religious group identifying less with religion or worship. Sometimes their religious view is referred to as ‘*nones*’ as they do not identify with anything even atheism.²

Common traits among both generations is the ability to integrate technology into their lives. Technology is normal. Both groups have embraced creating new forms of friendships online using technology to create new forms of friends and family. They are concerned only with their own individual world and engage with it alone. Their digital life is as important as and at times more important than their real life. Generation X and The Millennials now make up most of our workforce, decision makers and emerging leaders of society.

AN UNCONNECTED GENERATION

Both groups embrace change. Both groups are influential. Older institutions appear not to be relevant to how they live their lives. If Church statistics are true, they are the missing generation in our churches and parishes.³ Participation and religious practice among this group are in decline and have been in decline for the past thirty years. With an overall Mass attendance, weekly of around 40% or less, the under 50s represent the first generation where the majority do not attend or practise faith regularly. We have reached the tipping point, where most of those claiming to be Catholic are no longer active in their faith. Contrasting statistics show that over 80% of Irish feel Catholic, but large parts of towns and cities have regular participation of less than 10%. A form of *maintenance denial* is the dominant form of pastoral ministry, keeping things going rather than creating a model of Church fit for twenty-first century Ireland.

THREE EMERGING MODELS

In recent years, we have heard from Church leaders and commentators that we are living in times that are difficult. Words like reform and renewal are offered as solace to indicate that we are within a changing model of Church. Previously I have reflected on different categories of young people who have engagement with Church. To this I would add that we have not a unified Irish Church, but one that is clearly experienced differently in parts of

2 [Jump up](#) “*Religion Among the Millennials*”. Pew Research Center. Retrieved 24 February 2015

3 <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Religion-and-belief-among-Catholics-in-Ireland-round-5-ESS.pdf>

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the island. There is no clear universal plan for renewal in the Irish Church.

As someone who grew up and was formed in northern Irish Catholicism, I am quite conscious of my Catholic identity. I now live and work on the East Coast. The challenges in being Catholic are now scrutinized as Catholics seem to be part of a minority (even though 78.3% identify with being Catholic). Our Church nationally has aged. Younger generations have less contact with Church. This is not recent. Similar commentary occurred in the 1980s onwards.

The so-called 'scandals' in the Church from the early 1990s have led to the generation born and formed in these decades as being quite distant from Church and very different in its relationship to Church. As many were eating their breakfast before school or watching TV in the evening all they witnessed was a series of church scandals. No wonder many have abandoned Church and chose to follow a different path.

While we have a Church of twenty-six dioceses I would propose that we can no longer view the Church as one. The Church as experienced by people can be broken up into three distinct parts:

1. *The Northern Church.* Since Partition, northern Irish Catholics have had to create a sense of identity within a larger majority. Northern Catholics were led by many people, not just bishops. These were courageous Catholics who were clearly seeking an equality with their northern neighbours. 'The Troubles' did much harm. Some Catholics no longer identified with Church especially in working class areas. Their identity with Church changed. Church leaders such as Cardinals Tomás Ó Fiaich and Daly, Bishop Edward Daly in Derry and priests such as Tony Mulvey and Denis Faul, strove to guide Catholics towards a position of peaceful co-existence. During the peace process Catholics were engaged in many levels of political debate. In recent years, significant decline in church attendance and secularisation accelerated in the north. However, it is still very religious across the denominations in all age categories. This sense of religion is ingrained and difficult for people further South and East to understand.
2. *The Church in Leinster.* The East of Ireland has become the most secular and challenging places now to be Catholic. Between a mix of media, popular culture, sport and leisure, there are many challenges to practising faith and publicly identifying with Church. Many young parents are likely to be under catechized and have little or no faith commitment. Religion plays little part

in their life. In contrast, older people are still wounded by the effects of the scandals in the Church. Parishes are struggling to keep things going. Official figures point to less than 20% attendance in some East Coast parishes. The highest Yes to the recent marriage equality referendum was in Dublin. Many Catholics feel under pressure now to privatize their faith, tell few they believe and belong to local parishes.

3. *The Rest of Ireland.* In many parts of Ireland, there are still traffic jams on Sunday in local towns, where people attend church. Most people have a good relationship with their local parish. However, they may not attend in numbers as in previous generations. The Rest of Ireland Catholics have become older, on perception might be conservative. Traditional piety and progressive thinking are expressed by many people. Think of the recent campaign on Marriage Equality in Ireland and the role that the local Church played locally. There is no clear leader of this model of Church. However there are emerging voices in Church leadership in the West of Ireland, attempting to create programmes of renewal.

MODELS OF CHURCH AND FUTURE PROOFING

Change has taken root in Ireland, both in culture and in Church. As one looks around at many of the parishes in Ireland, the fundamental group of people active are those who are nearing retirement or enjoying active retirement. Most of these are in their senior years. They are matched mostly by a clergy who are aging and becoming more tired and possibly disillusioned.

Our parishes and dioceses appear to be struggling to find a language to appeal to an even younger generation. There now exists an unconnected generation of people who struggle to find their place within Church. The Church that many belong to and are part of is struggling to find a language and a method that is relevant and challenging to our younger people.

Some still have some residues of faith. Others are part of a cultural Catholicism where they attempt to cling to some of the sacramental milestones and rituals of Church. An emerging generation of families are now struggling to retain even the semblance of faith. Ireland in the south has endorsed a new definition of family. People now have the options of less cultural pressure to baptise their children or even present children for sacraments. Many young adults no longer consult the Church as a relevant option. A new generation of Millennials are choosing to mark passages of life such as marriage in new, innovative and non-Christian ceremonies. A generation of younger adults and their families have now brought the Church

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to a new *Tipping Point*, a point where the majority in Ireland live lives without reference to it.⁴ As their parents sang the song of Bob Dylan, 'The Times They Are A-Changin'', the children changed.

During the 'Boom Years' in Ireland the Irish lost the run of themselves. David McWilliams wrote:

We are richer than any imagined possible ten years ago. No Irish person has to emigrate, none of us need to pay for education and even our universities are free. Unemployment is the lowest in our history. We have more choice than ever, the place is more tolerant and no-one can be legally discriminated against. We have more cash in our back pockets than almost anyone in Europe. We are better off than 99% of humanity. We are top of foreigner's lists as places to live. Unlike many of our rich neighbours, in survey after survey we claim to be very happy. We no longer need to beg from others in the EU; in fact, we are giving them cash. We are a success. We have money and time. We can now afford to kick back and take stock, reflect and relax a bit.... The hard part is over. Or, at least that's what you might think.⁵

The challenge facing those in pastoral leadership is how to reconnect younger generations to Church.

REGENERATING PARISH STRUCTURES

The romantic and nostalgic memory of parish continues to fade or has disappeared. The infrastructure of parishes continues to support an aging model of parish life. A reimagining of the role of parish in modern Ireland needs to consider aging priests, aging Church participation and also an aging group of parish volunteers. Maybe it's time to let go of the older models of parish and structures. This would allow new ones to emerge.

The parish that I live in will most likely close in a generation as few people of my age regularly attend or practise. Celebration days and Feast Days are no longer honoured. People now live lives with little contact with Church. Few attend Church as a family.

Parishes are important places to gather the Christian community. However, the Christian community has changed in its makeup. Parishes seem to be spaces where Generation X and the Millennials are not present. However, those active in pastoral leadership need to take account of how we reach out and integrate younger generations and generations who are distant from regular Church

4 Malcolm Gladwell – *Tipping Point - How Little Things can make a big difference*, Little Brown and Company, 2000.

5 David Mc William *The Pope's Children, Ireland's New Elite*, Gill and Macmillan, 2005, P.3

life. Some of our Catholic parishes may not be sustainable or will face closure. This is inevitable. Maintaining Catholic communities also needs to be addressed in places where Church is in decline. New forms of mission are needed. The regeneration of Church needs to be bold in its vision.

It can only begin with a hard pruning. The Church is not meant to be a retirement home. The Church needs the energy and enthusiasm of younger generations. This will take imagination and new forms of leadership.

INDIFFERENCE

A search for meaning no longer takes place within a religious framework. Most likely it begins with Google rather than Church. Pope John Paul in the early 1990s writing in *Redemptoris Missio* observed,

Other great obstacles to the Church's missionary work include past and present divisions among Christians, de-Christianisation with Christian countries, the decrease of vocations to the apostolate and the counter-witness of believers and Christian communities failing to follow the model of Christ in their lives. But one of the most serious reasons for the lack of interest in the missionary task is a widespread indifferentism, which, sad to say, is found also among Christians. It is based on incorrect theological perspectives and is characterised by a religious relativism which gives rise to the belief that 'one religion is as good as another'⁶

In the late twentieth century in Europe and more recently in Ireland there has been a greater influence of indifference to Church and belonging to anything institutional. Religious cultures have been eroded in many places. Parts of Irish society now have become de-Christianized.

The monastery ruins that are scattered around Ireland are now joined by a Catholic footprint of property that is disappearing. Catholic hospitals, schools and convents are now places of the past. In modern Ireland, it can be difficult to notice where the Church is. At a time when culture and society need a counter-witness to secular values, religious presence has declined or disappeared.

WILL OUR CHILDREN HAVE FAITH?

How we formed generations in faith is under a new scrutiny. At the end of Catholic education or years of religious education, generations know less about their faith. Serious critique needs to

6 *Redemptoris Missio* 35

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occur into how our Religious Education programmes at all levels have failed to nurture a living faith. *Share the Good News*, a major Catechetical resource, never really got traction or attention in a pastoral context.⁷

As a parent, I know it is not easy to pass on faith in families today. There is more pressure now to conform to sporting and leisure obligations than to Church. Children today most likely have visited Santa's grotto more than they have visited Church. Most likely their parents have spent more time going to the cinema as a family rather than attending Church. Educators and teachers of faith have not been equipped to respond to the new challenges of our time. Many graduates from teaching colleges are most likely from a generation where the practice of faith is light and the understanding of personal faith is weak. There are teachers who do not belong to Church, do not attend a parish, yet continue to teach RE. Most don't really belong. Many don't believe in the Church. This is no fault, but an educational model that was created for a different era. A minority do and have expressed their frustration at not being able to be fully Catholic in the class room in case they offend.

Religious knowledge is important. However, without any religious experience generations have been allowed to know less about their faith and how to express it. As a result, for many, it's easier to say nothing about their faith than to ask for assistance. Few people can point to a personal relationship with Jesus or a basic encounter with God.⁸ Young parents struggle to pass on faith with little or no support.

Young people who do have some type of faith commitment speak about fear of telling their friends. A widening culture of ridicule of anything Catholic or Christian has meant that the faith of the younger generations has been suppressed. This has been the norm for many years.

CONCLUSION

Pope Francis speaks of peripheries and points of contact. Clearly the Church continues to be experienced very differently in different parts of the island. The Church needs to reimagine where it will be in ten years' time. Rather than remind us of the *glory days* of the 20th century or the challenges of the last twenty years, we need a Church conversation inviting people to roll up sleeves, address problems of mediocrity in liturgy and commitment to faith. We need a church of intentional disciples and not just people who pay

7 *Share the Good News*, National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland, Irish Episcopal Conference, Veritas, 2010

8 *Evangelii Gaudium* 3

their way. We need new expressions of renewal and reform. Maybe it's time for a younger generation of leaders to emerge to be part of this mission.

Millennials are impressed with the new vision that Pope Francis has brought to the face of Christianity. If anything, his pastoral vision is one of reaching out to those unconnected or on the margins. Parishes are key places of contact for Millennials who may still have residual faith. Those active in pastoral ministry, cleric and lay need to believe that in midst of the Millennial culture, there is a deep-rooted search for meaning. The culture of Gospel, lived and expressed in an authentic manner is something that attracts people. Rather than maintaining parishes based on old pastoral models, our parishes need to consider being places from where the mission of Gospel is central. Our parishes can become places of mission if we reach out to those who are disconnected or marginalized. This will require new methods and new expressions of expressing our faith.

If we truly listen to this generation of Millennials, then a regeneration of Church can happen. New forms of Church will emerge suitable and sustainable for our times. The message of the Gospel can still be heard today. It requires all believers to have courage and to believe in the transforming message of Jesus Christ.

The gender spectrum. Whatever the practical solutions, we must accept that we have made too categorical and unequivocal a divide between male and female. Our cultures have undervalued and degraded the feminine, both as internal part of each one of us, and as incarnated in over 50% of the human race registered as women. We should no longer make such stark divisions between the two genders but should recognize the continuity of the spectrum in which we all share, in varying degrees. Each of us is situated somewhere along a spectrum of masculine and feminine traits and characteristics, making each of our particular identities as unique and unrepeatable as a finger-print.

– MARK PATRICK HEDERMAN, *The Opal and the Pearl*, (Dublin: Columba Press) p. 197.