

# Millennials and Ministry on College Campuses

*Michael Galligan-Stierle*

To understand and better serve Catholic students on college campuses, ministers need a broader set of categories than liberal and conservative. The author provides twelve categories that offer insight into millennial Catholics and considers the implications of this for developing a pastoral plan in light of *Empowered by the Spirit*.

*Rarely has a generation of young people been so interested in spirituality and religion and so open to experiences of the holy and the transcendent. This is a kairos moment—the right moment—for the Catholic Church and her pastoral ministry to, with, and for young people.*

—National Study of Youth and Religion

First and foremost, university ministry is about the pastoral care of eighteen- to twenty-six-year-old collegians. This age span is the largest group of the more than seventeen million university students currently enrolled in more than four thousand institutions of higher learning in the United States. They are part of the generational cohort identified as *Millennials*, having been born from 1982–2001. While campus ministers must be pastorally attentive to students, faculty, and staff of all ages, Millennials are often their primary pastoral charge. Who are Catholic

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Millennials? And as a Catholic pastoral leader, how is one to minister to this generation of Catholic collegians that forms the largest denominational cohort (30 percent of the over seventeen million) within higher education at this time in history? This article addresses these questions, reminds us of our simple pastoral plan, and offers tangible resources for understanding Catholic young adults and campus ministry.

## *Catholic Millennials Today*

Catholic young adults today are spiritually diverse. They are neither monolithic in their Catholic outlook nor similar to previous generations in their expressions of the faith. It is not uncommon for older pastoral ministers to identify the spirituality of these young adult Catholics with the traditional, politically charged labels of *liberal* and *conservative*. These descriptors are inadequate and more often than not pejorative and inaccurate. Since Catholic young adults express their Catholic faith in a multitude of spiritual ways, it is important to accurately identify these expressions.

It should be noted that the generational young adult impulse to emphasize one spiritual path over another is systemic to the Christian faith; for example, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul each emphasizes a different expression of Jesus' message in his writings. This variety continues over the centuries as various spiritual paths have been warmly embraced within the Catholic community through a range of religious disciplines and methodologies: Dominican, Franciscan, Carmelite, Mercy, and Ignatian, to mention but a few. This continues and is encouraged by our church, most recently to young adults in the pastoral letter from the U.S. bishops, *Sons and Daughters of the Light*.

Today, Millennials advance this insight and passion of various spiritual paths in unique ways. In an effort to recognize this reality, I have identified twelve spiritual categories embraced by young adults today (see chart). This identification of twelve "types" is not exhaustive, and some types slightly overlap others. Articulation of twelve types is not meant to constrain the spiritual or religious outlook of the young adult today but rather help to clarify various paths of Catholic incarnation in this new generation. While some individuals may exhibit one dominant spiritual "type," many individuals express themselves through multiple spiritual "categories." Some who have heard me speak on this subject have suggested that these twelve categories apply to many Catholics, not just Millennials.

To identify the broad tendencies in each of the twelve expressions of being a Catholic young adult, the twelve categories have been organized into four subsets entitled: *structured*, *energetic*, *socially aware*, and *present*. A short explanation of the twelve categories follows.

<i>Structured</i>	<i>Energetic</i>	<i>Socially Aware</i>	<i>Present</i>
The Church Apologist	The Church Evangelical	The Church in Service	The Church on Sunday
The Church Devotional	The Church Communal	The Church Prophetic	The Church Cultural
The Church Sacramental	The Church Creative	The Church All-Inclusive	The Church Eclipsed

*Church Apologists* seek an intellectual understanding of the Catholic faith. Apologists desire to learn the faith in depth and therefore spend much time studying the tenets of the Catholic faith in detail. Their prayer methods usually include ancient memorized prayers, which they strongly advocate. They bring an ability to articulate the faith to fellow Catholics as well as to nonbelievers and a keen ability to identify and understand church doctrine. Sometimes the apologist can overintellectualize Catholicism, become very defensive justifying the Catholic faith, or lack tolerance by advancing excessive absolutes.

*Church Devotionals* are active in faith primarily through silent, personal prayer. They are especially drawn to Christ’s presence where words are unnecessary for prayer, and they often have a strong devotion to Our Lady. They bring a powerful presence of prayer into the worshiping community, and they are often engaged in intercessory prayer for others in the church. Sometimes Church Devotionals can be hesitant to share their faith with others, tend to minimize the need to “dress-up” worship with “extras,” and may need to learn the rich difference between individual prayer and communal prayer, especially regarding the celebration of the Eucharist.

*Church Sacramentals* love to attend Mass on Sunday and frequently attend weekday Mass. They bring a deep reverence to Christ’s presence in the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. They may volunteer as a liturgical minister, a sacristan, or a liturgy committee member. A few are willing to assist in adorning the church for various liturgical seasons. Some see the Eucharist as the sole expression of faith, while others may overemphasize the liturgical ritual of the Catholic faith.

*Church Evangelicals* believe that a personal relationship with Christ and first-hand knowledge of Scripture is central to being Catholic. They bring a strong commitment to witnessing their faith to others. Oftentimes Praise and Worship music is an enjoyable way to pray. Sometimes these believers become impatient with those who have little regard for Scripture, and some may inappropriately focus on the individual over the communal dimensions of Catholicism.

*Church Communals* are eager to be connected with other young adults. They are often drawn to church in search of friends with similar values, potential partners, or group activities. Some Communals have engaging personalities that can attract others to become involved in church activities, while others feel safe

in developing their social skills within the context of the church community. Sometimes these young adults only become involved in church activities if they have a social component and many find prayer and faith exploration difficult unless it is connected to a social event. Some are drawn to megachurches where young adults are engaged socially and spiritual growth is connected to small-group sharing.

*Church Creatives* are young adults who are active in the faith community through drama, music, and art. These individuals are often culturally literate, innovative, and engaging in presenting the faith. They are very adept at exploring and expressing the Gospel message through cultural means and are eager to share these gifts with the community. Sometimes these individuals overlook the reverential aspect of worship (e.g., acting as if the altar were a stage and the congregation an

audience), and some may only participate in activities of the faith community when their artistic gift is needed.

*Church in Service* is the group of young adults who directly serve those in need. They are strong advocates and witnesses of Catholic social teaching through direct service activities. Many work tirelessly serving the marginalized members of society and often energize others to get involved. They are attentive and committed to the social implications of the Gospel. Some of this type may emphasize the temporal over the spiritual, and others may minimize or disregard an active liturgical life. A few may lose sight of the importance of self-care when serving others.

*Church Prophetics* strive to reform unjust systems affecting the poor or disadvantaged. Seeking structural change, they are often active in campus peace fellowships, advocacy groups, and labor conflicts. They can have a deep understanding of domestic and international political and socioeconomic conditions, as well as Catholic social teaching. Often they will point out church failings as well as societal flaws. They tend to be passionate about their cause as well as compassionate

toward those affected by injustice. Some may become overly critical or cynical, lose sight of the religious dimension of their call, and/or become so engaged in the conversation that little time is actually devoted to changing the structure or caring for the marginalized.

*Church All-Inclusive* is the group of young adults who see religion (even Catholicism) as a confining category for one's spiritual life. Often they have been exposed

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to other religions through friendship, a university-level course, time in the armed services, or a significant book. Members of this group possess a reverence for all God's creation, and often are committed to being a good person and "loving" others. Many Church All-Inclusives are welcoming of newcomers, often seeking to expand the worldview of the church membership. Their social awareness manifests itself in defending those outside the Catholic faith. They are open to various denominational practices and prayer experiences regardless of denominational or creedal differences between religions, and they bring a variety of new ideas to the Catholic community. Some may not be able to articulate clearly or convincingly Catholic beliefs or liturgical practices, often emphasizing one's individual spiritual search over the value of Catholic "truth" or Catholic community values.

*The Church on Sunday* is that committed group of young adults who regularly participate in the liturgy on Sunday but for various reasons do not participate in other church activities. This group finds community elsewhere. Many identify busyness, disinterest, lack of church peers, or a significant negative experience as the primary reason for a Sunday-only attitude. Some have an obligation mentality toward Mass attendance and see no reason why their Catholicism needs to be something more. Finding ways to more fully engage the Church on Sunday constituency will add talented individuals currently untapped by the church community.

*Church Culturals* were baptized as infants and belong to families who identify as Catholic and celebrate major Catholic holidays. Many are familiar with certain traditions of the faith and the sacraments received in their Catholic upbringing but rarely attend Mass or other church activities. These individuals are more abundant where religion is connected to political, national, or ethnic identity. Some may decorate their living space with devotional materials. Some only possess a nominal understanding of the church, their Christian calling, or an adult faith. For some, saints are invoked more often than God when there is a prayer request.

*The Church Eclipsed* are those Catholic young adults who were baptized Catholic and who may or may not have grown up Catholic, but now for all practical purposes are distant from Catholicism. Many were born into a family where religious practice was not encouraged, and some have been angered or disappointed by the church. Many have chosen not to be engaged and are apathetic toward the Catholic community or any religious denomination, while others have found a new spiritual home in another community of faith. This is the largest group of young adult Catholics. In some ways, they mirror the Jews at Jesus' time identified as "the people of the land."

By using these twelve descriptive categories, the Catholic higher education community can enrich its current simplistic identification of young adult Catholics as either liberal or conservative and replace it with a descriptive language of faith. Now instead of identifying a young adult as conservative, one might say she or he is "apologetic and service minded." Or instead of being labeled a liberal, a young

adult may be identified as “prophetic, creative, and sacramental.” By listening, observing, and asking young adults to identify their “dominant spiritual passions,” an affirming language of young adult spirituality can emerge. By verbalizing a neutral or positive tone with each of the twelve descriptors, the Catholic higher education community can become more “young adult friendly.”

## ***Pastoral Care and the University Community***

**I**n 1985 the U.S. bishops gave the university pastoral minister a great gift that has endured the test of time, a pastoral letter entitled *Empowered by the Spirit: Campus Ministry Faces the Future*. This pastoral letter provides the framework of Catholic ministry “to and with” higher education. More than half of the pastoral letter is devoted to “Aspects of Campus Ministry” wherein the bishops establish a framework for a ministerial plan.

The brief description of the six aspects found in *Empowered by the Spirit* that follows can assist in designing a pastoral plan for the campus. The two programming areas of *education* and *action* will offer ways to enrich the spiritual lives of Millennials delineated in the twelve categories above.

### ***Forming the Faith Community***

*Empowered by the Spirit* begins its pastoral plan by recommending the formation of small and large groups of people who pray, share, and socialize together. Of the six aspects, this one encompasses the largest range of programming for strengthening community, from Mass to barbecues, from Bible study groups to sports teams. The pastoral letter grounds this aspect in the social dimension of our faith and human life. The Church Communal type is most at home within this aspect; but given this aspect’s large range of activity, many spiritual types can find ways to express their faith within this component. The Church Devotional, the Church on Sunday, and the Church Eclipsed Millennials may need additional encouragement and invitation to engage in this aspect.

- Education: Join a faith sharing or Bible study group (e.g., Church Apologists)
- Action: Seek out recreational activities with the Catholic community such as a picnic or sports event (e.g., Church All-Inclusive); religious activities such as Mass, praise and worship nights, or Benediction (respectively, the Church on Sunday, Church Evangelicals, Church Devotionals).

### ***Appropriating the Faith***

As Catholics mature in faith, they integrate their beliefs into their daily lives. Ordinarily this happens during the young adult years. The pastoral minister is

called upon during this time to pass on the theological richness of the Catholic faith to Millennials so that these truths can become living realities. Of the six aspects, this aspect is most concerned with the teachings of our church and the creedal belief system of the Catholic faith. Consequently, this aspect is most appealing to the Church Apologists. Church Devotionals may require attention to help them understand the importance of sharing the faith with others.

- Education: Organize and attend events such as a Catholic Basics Series, Theology on Tap, comparative religions study seminar, *Holy Grounds* seminar, or a Catholicism 101 lecture.
- Action: Attend and participate in a pilgrimage, rosary, Stations of the Cross, or morning and evening prayer opportunities.

### ***Forming the Christian Conscience***

According to *Empowered*, forming one's conscience is an essential part of becoming an adult Catholic. Developing good moral judgment according to Gospel values and the teachings of our church is an adult activity. A Christian is not only called upon to avoid evil but challenged to do the good. Discovering ways to help all spiritual types develop this dimension of their daily lives is often a real challenge. The Church Evangelicals and Church Apologists can be engaged with this aspect when it is taught as a class or seminar on "living the moral life"; the Church on Sunday can be encouraged to embrace this aspect through homilies at Mass that are focused on daily living of the faith within the marketplace, and the Church in Service/Church Prophetics can appropriate the moral life when it is connected to living more justly in the world. The Church All-Inclusive may require extra attention to explain that freedom is not an opting out of moral practice but rather an opting into a relationship with God that is life-giving.

- Education: Do Forced Choice value-clarification exercises; read the Bible and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as you make significant moral choices.
- Action: Practice virtue- or Beatitude-focused living for a month; seek opportunities to participate in the sacrament of reconciliation; proactively seek mentoring relationships.

### ***Educating for Justice***

The pastoral letter encourages us both to engage in service to others (Church in Service) as well as to advocate for just causes through peaceful protests (Church Prophetics). Recent research shows this aspect is viewed by many Millennials as the most defining characteristic of a Catholic. The Church All-Inclusive participate within this category since some students who have no religious affiliation are drawn to spring-break service-oriented programs. Church Devotionals, Church

Sacramentals, and Church Evangelicals may require extra attention to explain the central importance of Catholic social teaching in the Catholic tradition.

- Education: Learn Catholic social teachings and restorative justice; participate in theological reflection activities.
- Action: Volunteer by visiting a care facility, homeless shelter, or soup kitchen; participate in a spring-break trip to an urban or rural area in need; engage in advocacy opportunities by making the Catholic position known to government officials or unfair corporation leaders.

### ***Facilitating Personal Development***

This aspect focuses on the Catholic belief that God is interested in all aspects of one's life, not just spiritual activities. Consequently, individuals are encouraged to have a relationship with God that includes the refining of choices related to relationships, career, education, and leisure time activities. The Church Eclipsed and Church Culturals may find a more comfortable place here, given the practical and personal nature of this category. Church in Service Millennials may also see a clear connection here as they spend their leisure time serving marginalized groups.

- Education: Connect career, family, and faith life; seek cultural enrichment opportunities; develop a thirst for lifelong learning by participating in activities outside the requirements for graduation.
- Action: Develop wholesome friendships and use recreation time wisely; develop good physical and emotional outlets; become an involved citizen of the community.

### ***Developing Leaders for the Future***

This aspect involves a maturation of the baptismal commitment as a member of the Body of Christ, to develop leadership skills for the enrichment of the community. Church Creatives may find that this aspect most closely matches their strengths of integrating the Gospel message through cultural means and sharing their gifts with the community. Church Evangelicals can enhance their strong faith commitment by witnessing their faith to others through leadership roles. Church Apologists may need help here refining their faith expression by developing their leadership skills to incarnate what John Paul II believed apologetics to be: an integrated faith that bears witness in daily life rather than proof-texting.

- Education: Attend a leadership seminar; remain attentive to God's call by reading and discussing your personal vocation; refine your leadership talent by reading books about great leaders.
- Action: Excel as a peer leader within campus ministry; pursue a student government position or leadership position in a campus organization.



The USCCB pastoral letter *Empowered by the Spirit: Campus Ministry Faces the Future* is full of Catholic programming ideas for young adults of all spiritual types and preferences. The campus minister who offers various pastoral programs suited for the wide range of spiritual expressions within Millennials today will enable the next generation to appropriate the Catholic faith as adults.

### ***The Simple Pastoral Plan: Extending Ministerial Outreach Through Empowerment***

While the twelve categories of Millennials and *Empowered by the Spirit* offer tangible ways to minister to collegians today, Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est* reminds all of us about the basics of our faith: God loved us first, we are invited to love God and love neighbor, and we are all called to invite others into a love affair with God. This is based on the two great commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, your whole soul, and your whole might" (Deut 6:4-5), and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18b). Our pastoral agenda could not be clearer. Proclaiming these simple truths in word and deed to young adults is the pastoral goal of all who minister in a university setting.

*Empowered by the Spirit* invites us, as university pastoral leaders, to provide spiritual organization to the higher education community and empower the Catholic community to share their spiritual gifts. *Empowered* reminds us that all members of the faith community are born with an array of gifts that can be offered for the good of the community. Since young adults are significantly affected by their peers during the college years, Millennials are best situated to influence other Millennials. By engaging and equipping Millennials who embody the spiritual types listed above, the faith community will be enriched in a multitude of ways. Given this model, your pastoral leadership must entail equipping and empowering members of the university to share their gifts. As *Empowered* continues to challenge us:

Campus Ministry has the great opportunity to tap the immense pool of talent in our colleges and universities and to help form future leaders for society and the church. Large numbers of intelligent and ambitious young people are on campuses, gaining the knowledge and skills needed to launch them into eventual positions of leadership in the world. . . . Campus ministers can facilitate the development of leaders by encouraging members of the faith community to identify their gifts and to use them for the common good. Individuals must be helped to overcome their fears and gain confidence in their abilities. (nos. 93, 99)

While some may say that university students are not interested in embracing their Catholic faith or growing spiritually, research continues to document the reality

that this cohort of young adults is thirsty for spiritual growth. The good news is that God's love finds expression in every generation.

### *Additional Resources for Understanding Catholic Young Adults and Campus Ministry*

Knowing young adults today is much more than the twelve paths described above. To sharpen one's pastoral care and understanding, a few resources are strongly recommended: Sharon Daloz Parks's text provides an in-depth understanding of the spiritual and psychological processes of young adults: *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (Jossey-Bass, 2000). The annual review of the *Beloit College Mindset List* is humorous, but I highly recommend it as it is always instructive (<http://www.beloit.edu/~pubaff/mindset>). A few recent books can be helpful as well: Colleen Carroll's *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults Are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy* (Loyola, 2002); Christian Smith's *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford, 2005); Robert Wuthnow's *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty and Thirty Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, 2007); and Dean Hoge et al.'s *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in a Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, 2001). A research project that is very instructional regarding the gulf between the Millennials' desire for spiritual integration within the classroom and faculty caution for such integration are these two studies: *Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose* and *Spirituality and the Professoriate: A National Study of Faculty Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors* ([www.spirituality.ucla.edu](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu)).

Learning more about university ministry is essential for the campus pastoral minister. The best resource for developing a ministerial plan for campus ministry is the *Gospel on Campus: A Handbook of Campus Ministry Programs and Resources*, second edition, edited by Michael Galligan-Stierle (USCC, 1996). More than forty university pastoral leaders were enlisted to provide programming specifics to advance the dreams and aspirations of *Empowered*. It delineates best-practice programming for Catholic campus ministry. Three other documents essential for university work that can be found online are the following: *The Church's Presence in the University and in the University Culture* (1994) at the Vatican's website; *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults* (1996); and *Pope Benedict XVI's Address to Educators* (April 2008) at the USCCB's website.

Understanding Millennials, implementing effective programming, and equipping peer ministers contribute to a threefold pastoral plan that will bear much fruit. It

will also give unique expression to the multitude of spiritual dimensions of the Catholic faith within the university community.

### *References*

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National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference. *Empowered by the Spirit: Campus Ministry Faces the Future*. Washington, DC: USCC, 1985. <http://www.usccb.org/education/highered/empowered.shtml> (accessed October 25, 2008).

3. College ministry moves extremely quickly. The pace of the college ministry schedule is fast. Because of the summer and Christmas breaks, a campus ministry year is only about eight months. Why does this provide an opportunity? I can think of two ways.Â

Evangelizing international students on your local college campus may be one of the easiest and most strategic ways for churches to obey the Great Commission by seeking to make disciples of all nations. The number of foreign students on F-1 visas in U.S. colleges and universities has grown dramatically from 110,000 in 2001 to 524,000 in 2012. Whatâ€™s more, the sharpest increases have occurred among students from difficult-to-reach or closed countries like China and Saudia Arabia.[2]. I have grown college ministries, but never started one. Here is good advice from someone who started a campus ministry with just two students. He has been there and done it.....and done it outside the Bible Belt. This e-book is worth your time!"Â

As a college ministry leader, I have never felt like Iâ€™ve had enough of it. Seven years ago my wife and I started our ministry, Christian Challenge from scratch and by Godâ€™s grace we now have a growing team of staff and student leaders laboring on campus with us. Despite our growth, there has been a constant struggle to answer the question: "How can I use my time for what makes the greatest impact on campus?" This is certainly not a unique question, and it is one that has proven helpful to pursue an answer to." Join us for the National Collegiate Ministry Summit! The Collegiate Summit is an event exclusively for collegiate leaders.Â

The 2021 Collegiate Summit includes plenary sessions where you will hear insightful talks designed to help you better minister to the unique needs of college students, a variety of breakouts led by experts in an array of fields, and multiple idea labs where practitioners direct focused conversations around specific ministry topics.