Filling the Spiritual Void: Liturgical Prayer that Nourishes Catholic Millennials

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)
ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol6/iss1/20.

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“My soul is thirsting for you, the living God.” Perhaps no other biblical verse than Psalm 63:2 better describes the current state of the Millennial Generation, those born after 1982. Whether they claim to be “spiritual,” “religious,” both, or neither, there is no question this population is thirsting and possesses a deep hunger for meaning, purpose, and truth that contemporary culture cannot afford. In a world where personal spirituality trumps institutionalized religion, the need for effective prayer forms for young people is great, perhaps now more than ever. How, then, can pastoral ministers provide meaningful communal prayer experiences for this population, and what is most effective? After providing current research on the Millennial generation today, I will analyze the components and common elements of two popular and successful liturgies among young Catholics—Taizé Prayer and Eucharistic Adoration—in order to identify what elements of liturgical prayer provide this generation with authentic and meaningful experiences of God.

The postmodern world in which Millennials are raised is unlike any other era in history. Living in a secular backdrop, consumerism, materialism, pluralism, tolerance, individualism, and freedom to make choices—all hallmarks of American society—reign supreme. With these experiences and values come large consequences, both positive and negative. Freedom allows for a cut-and-paste mosaic of feelings, facts, experiences, and lessons learned, and, as a result, central spiritual tenets consist of a customized blend of multiple-faith views and religious practices. Living in a pluralistic world leads to an openness, tolerance, and curiosity for various belief systems; postmodern beliefs surrender objectivity and absolutes to subjectivity and relativity; freedom of choices creates busy, chaotic lives that overwhelm and result in “option overload”; and technology allows relationships with parents to remain close when separated by distance.

Hence, in such a confusing and fragmented world, it is no surprise that institutionalized religion, for many young people, has become obsolete. A study by UCLA confirmed that, while college students have a high level of spiritual engagement, commitment, and growth, church attendance significantly declines. Their concern lies more with being a good person and discovering the meaning and purpose in their life rather than adhering to weekly religious services. Values of commitment, duty, obedience, obligation, accountability, and ties to the past are almost completely absent in the realm of religion. In addition, religion is something an individual chooses and reaffirms by their personal needs and experiences, superseding church doctrines; and individual conscience is prized in matters of belief. Robert Wuthnow captures this well: Spiritual tinkering is a reflection of the pluralistic religious society in which we live, the freedom we permit ourselves in making choices about faith, and the necessity of making those choices in the face of uprootedness and change that most young adults experience. It involves piecing together ideas about spirituality from many sources, especially through conversations with one’s friends.

Due to all of the various factors affecting Millennials, six major religious types of young adults ages 18-23 have emerged. Although each category will not be examined in detail, the titles overall speak for themselves:

1. Committed Traditionalists 15%
2. Selective Adherents 30%
3. Spiritually Open 15%
4. Religiously Indifferent 25%
5. Religiously Disconnected 5%
6. Irreligious 10%

2 Smith, After the Baby Boomers, 49.
4 Ibid., 114.
5 Ibid., 134. Wuthnow notes 57 percent of young adults ages 18-23 believe many religions may be true.
6 Smith, Souls in Transition, 45.
7 Ibid., 34.
8 Thomas Rausch, Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006), 1. See also www.spirituality.ucla.org for the results of the study.
9 Ibid., 11.
10 Wuthnow, After the Baby Boomers, 133.
11 Rausch, Being Catholic, 9.
12 Wuthnow, After the Baby Boomers, 135.
13 Smith, Souls in Transition, 166-168.
Given the results, this data suggests at least 15 percent of young people are going to church regularly, probably more since some Selective Adherents likely attend religious services. An alarming thirty-four percent of Millennials never attend religious services.\textsuperscript{14}

The data offered on the general population of Millennials bears a stark similarity to the trends among Catholic Millennials. A report published by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (hereafter CARA) in 2007, drawn from research by Thomas Rausch,\textsuperscript{15} reports five trends.\textsuperscript{16} The first trend notes lower levels of engagement. Catholics are behind Protestant teenagers by as much as 25 percentage points on various measures of religious belief, practice, experiences, and commitments,\textsuperscript{17} and they tend to score below the overall average on measures for religious commitment and engagement.\textsuperscript{18} A study by the National Association for Lay Ministry in 2011 reports one in five registered parishioners (19 percent) is between the ages of 18 and 39; 13 percent of Catholic parish staff members are ages 19-39, and 7 percent of all Lay Ecclesial Ministers are under the age of 30.\textsuperscript{19}

Second, young Catholics are unable to articulate their faith: they are not well-versed in the core narratives of their faith, nor can they identify what is distinctive about Catholicism.\textsuperscript{20} Many scholars note this and the dire need among Millennial Catholics for a basic theological literacy\textsuperscript{21} since young Catholics lack the formation in the home and school taken for granted by their grandparents.\textsuperscript{22} Moreover, the Catholic subculture no longer exists, another avenue lost that had once provided formation and education.

This basic theological illiteracy also aligns with a diminished institutional commitment to the Church. Since so many Millennials are less familiar with the ecclesial dimension of their faith, most lack a strong commitment, preferring a more selective approach to authority.\textsuperscript{23} Religion and spirituality are divorced from one another rather than united; therefore, many young people believe they can be good Catholics without participating in the liturgical life of the Church.\textsuperscript{24}

An increasing number of young Catholics no longer see their involvement in the life of the Church as a matter of obligation and obedience. Rather, the Church has become a voluntary society, a Church of choice, and they want it to be a more egalitarian, participatory, and democratic community. Many Catholics, galvanized by the recent clergy sexual abuse scandal and the failures of authority it revealed, feel themselves called to a more adult role in the Church’s life. The Church still needs to negotiate ways to provide for some share in ecclesial decision-making by the laity and greater accountability for its bishops.\textsuperscript{25}

That being said, it should be noted that a significant minority of young Catholics is emerging in the Church—those deemed “Evangelical Catholics,” “Neo-Conservatives,” or “John Paul II Catholics”—who are more enthusiastic and informed about Catholicism. Some have had a Catholic version of the “born again” experience, and all are ecclesial in their faith and more traditional in expression.\textsuperscript{26} They are often legalistic, feeling charged with safeguarding the interests of the faith in a hostile culture,\textsuperscript{27} and their liturgical dispositions are geared towards an interest in habits, vestments, other Church paraphernalia, traditional music, and devotions, as well as an increasingly reactionary stance toward moderate views on authority, moral teaching and liturgical law.\textsuperscript{28}

The Church also has a major credibility problem. Although a centralized authority is issuing pronouncements, few Millennials seem to be listening.\textsuperscript{29} A serious divide exists between Church teachings, especially in the realm of gender equality and sexual morality, and how young people actually live their lives.\textsuperscript{30} The global sexual abuse crisis undoubtedly contributed to their distrust of the Church, in addition to the many other factors of the postmodern culture that have been cited.

Having examined the trends and views of Catholic Millennials, liturgical prayer forms and effective means of prayer for this particular generation will be considered. I propose six common elements of liturgical prayer that are of great importance when ministering to this population: use of the arts and sensory experience; silent, personal prayer time; sung and spoken texts that carry meaning; the use of ritual;
sacraments and symbols; and both a communal and personal dimension of worship.

The first to be examined, and perhaps most important, is the use of the arts and sensory experiences in liturgy. The positive role various art forms play in fostering people’s prayer must be underscored: in a survey of the general population (various ages and religious beliefs), 79 percent agree that art, music, and literature help them to experience the deeper meaning and purpose of life. What is more, younger Americans are exposed to music and value it in a different way (consumed as a commodity), which is also true for the visual arts and some other kinds of artistic expressions. While older adults worry about music and art sending the wrong signals, the younger adults “take a more inclusive attitude toward the relationship between the arts and spirituality.”

Many people across various spectrums of belief include artistic activities when they pray: 43 percent use music or singing; 23 percent look at a sacred object such as a cross or painting, and 19 percent light candles. These trends do not solely occur in communal worship, for 38 percent of people have felt close to God singing or listening to religious music other than during a worship service, and 56 percent of people agree that art can help people to deepen their spirituality. Catholics, too, note the importance of the arts and spirituality: when asked to assess the overall importance of various art forms to their spiritual development, 61 percent said that music has been important.

Respondents also noted the importance of ambience and that the arts help create this ambience. Wuthnow notes the emphasis on ambience in prayer comes up again and again in people’s memories of how they first learned about prayer. People who take prayer seriously know that how one prays, and the context in which one prays, is important. Factors affecting ambience have been mentioned including candles, artwork, and music; other elements that appeal to the senses may be things such as incense or rooms that are dimly illuminated.

The arts, spirituality, and the Catholic Church, of course, go hand in hand, thereby winning favorable points with the younger generation in this regard when liturgies convey beauty. Countless documents have been written by the magisterium on the importance of music in the liturgy. In doing so, they note the universal quality music possesses. “Music can unveil a dimension of meaning and feeling, a communication of ideas and intuitions words alone cannot yield. This dimension is integral to the human personality and to growth in faith.” Hence, music (and the arts) transcends denominations and religious beliefs—as is noted in the data already mentioned; it points us to something beyond ourselves in a very real and visceral way, not only for young people, but for everyone. Bishop Anthony Pilla eloquently states:

They [music and spirituality] both deal with the spirit of humanity. There should be a great complementarity because the arts are one of the manifestations of the glory of God, one of the infinite manifestations of that glory. I don’t know how you express divine sentiment and spiritual values without some artistic involvement.

The second component that helps young adults foster prayer is silent, personal prayer time. Like most adults, the lives of Millennials are overly busy, often chaotic, and far too stressful. Compound that phenomenon with their postmodern upbringing, and one can imagine their dilemma. Young adult minds and lives are a cacophony of noise and unrest; the demanding nature of their studies, work, and juggling of various relationships is overwhelming to say the least. They need quiet. They need peace and tranquility, time and space to empty their minds and hearts in order to have any chance at prayer and encounter with the divine. Liturgical services that provide for that space and quiet resonate well with this population.

Third, texts that carry meaning for young people are a key component to communal worship. Too often Catholic liturgies, particularly mass, becomes all too routine, dull, and boring for them because these experiences lack meaning. Ray Repp has argued a form of dualism exists in the texts of the mass, that the human person and divine are separated by so great of a distance that the foundational and incarnational theology of Catholicism—“God with us”—is undermined. This has perhaps been manifested most recently with the recent translation of the Roman Missal, a translation many would argue creates a further chasm between God and the people. This can be highly detrimental for young people, as

41 Wuthnow, All in Sync, 68-69.
43 With the publication of Liturgicam Authenticam by Pope John Paul II in 2001, the method for translation established by Comme le Prévoit in 1969 was reversed from using a system called “dynamic equivalence” to literal, word-by-word translation. As a result, the new translation of the Third Edition of the Roman Missal is far less intelligible for congregations—syntax and sentence structures are often grammatically poor, and translations of many theological words are incomprehensible. Thus, this creates an image
they need texts that speak to them, their experience, and their relationship with God. When the texts do not resonate, liturgy and life are divorced, and the meaning behind everything in the mysteries being celebrated is lost.

Hence, the texts that are prayed in communal worship are important—very important. Words that carry deep meaning for young people—and I would contend all people—are most often Scriptural and express some form of personal relationship with the divine, whether invoking praise, lament, comfort, or longing. Plural pronouns (us, we) that speak to the larger community gathered are important, but if it does not resonate within them personally in some way, it typically fails to impact. Thus, psalms are often very effective in their inherently personal nature and ability for “raw” communication with God, encompassing every human emotion.44

The verb tenses also bear importance: words in the present tense are most effective as they speak to young people in the here and now and in their present needs, hopes, desires, and trials. Words that speak merely to remembering events of the past (e.g., the ancestors of faith) carry little impact as well as what will or may happen in the future.45 Likewise, texts conveying doctrine or creedal statements typically fail since they do not make a personal connection with the believer. Rather, lyrics that are either composed in the first person “I” or second person “you” speak much more deeply to young people.

The first person voice conveys a personal relationship between the worshipper and God (“God make me a sanctuary, pure and holy”),46 while lyrics composed in the second person also invoke God, usually calling upon God to do something or recognizing the good things God does for his people (“Within our darkest night, you kindle a fire that never dies away”47 or “You are my strength when I am weak”).48 Finally, texts that are concise, repetitive, and easy to remember prove effective with young people in communal prayer settings.

In addition to texts, the ritual component of communal prayer for young people is significant. Although this may seem counterintuitive for Millennials living in the postmodern era, it is for this very reason that ritual is vital. As a “conventional, formal, conscious, and deliberate pattern of actions whose purpose is neither pragmatic nor ‘efficient,’ but is symbolic,”49 ritual provides stability, predictability, safety, and familiarity amidst young people’s highly fragmented, confusing, and often unstable lives. The need for meaningful, repetitive ritual is also built into their very human nature,50 it has the capacity to remove them from “every day life,” imbuing times and places with heightened and even sacred significance.51 For Millennials living in a rootless, secular culture, this departure from the everyday provides a space for them to experience God’s transcendence and mystery in ways they may not be able to encounter, or recognize, in their day-to-day lives.

In addition, rituals unify, bonding a group of people even when all the participants do not interpret the ritual in the same way.52 Nathan Mitchell offers the analogy of experiencing a musical performance: the meaning comes from the performance itself (experience), not the program notes (explanation).53 From this collective experience, each individual takes his or her own meaning away from the event, yet all are united in sharing the common experience. In this way human intellect cedes to human experience and emotion. This is critical for young people: it touches them in a very profound and deep way, and it fulfills their need to belong to something larger than themselves.

Young people also pray well through the use of symbols and sacraments in ritual. Religious symbols speak to the deeper meaning in life, “respond to questions about the intelligibility of experience,” and “mediate between and interactive-ly link affectivity and practical intelligence.”54 In other words, symbols help Millennials make sense of their lives and place in the world. Sacraments, in the Catholic sense, can prove even more powerful due to their efficacious nature, making grace present in the here and now through tangible means. Recovering this sacramental perspective is highly important for young people, for it leads to a recovery of a sense of mystery of God’s action and also the mystery of their own sinfulness and need for redemption.55 Symbols and sacraments, like music, unveil meaning, feeling, and depth that words alone cannot.

Finally, liturgies that possess both a personal and communal dimension resonate extremely well with Millennials. Having already discussed the personal dimension, let us

44 See Psalms 22, 23, 63, and 118 for examples.
45 It should be noted a number of Praise and Worship songs, which often resonate with young people, do utilize the future tense.
46 John Thompson and Randy Scruggs, “Sanctuary” (Whole Armor/Full Armor Music), 1982.
48 Dennis L Jernigan, “You Are My All in All” (Shepherd’s Heart Music), 1991.
turn to the importance of community. Living in an extremely
individualistic culture, young people crave companionship and
community—whether large or small—desperately, so much so
that many view it more important than their own salvation. This
should come as no surprise, for young people struggle to
feel welcomed and accepted in a culture of perfection, intense
pressure, and bullying. Facebook and other forms of technology
only compound the problem; while Millennials have hundreds (or more) of “friends” on Facebook, they are more
lonely now than ever and longing for real relationships with
other people and with God. Technology does not afford real
human relationships; it only deepens the void. Kevin Seasoltz
speaks well of this dilemma among Americans in general:

Searching for mores sources of affection, which are not
available at home, and alienated by the impersonal charac-
ter of much of modern life, people often search for new
kinds of interpersonal structures that satisfy their need for
support, affection, and stability, and which provide them
with a sense of belonging. The sheer pressure of modern
life often seems too great to be borne by individuals alone;
they feel they need others in a way not felt perhaps so
strongly in the past, when the structures of society and social
convention were firmer than they are today and when
there were mediating structures which stood between indi-
viduals in their private lives and the larger institutions of
public life.

Though written nearly three decades ago, these observations
could not be more applicable today. Most would agree the
state of the situation is much, much worse due to the many
“advances” made since that time. Hence, fostering commu-
nal prayer that is welcoming, non-judgmental, and authentic
is of utmost importance when ministering to the young adult
population.

Having outlined the major elements necessary for
providing a meaningful prayer experience for young adults,
let us now turn to two specific types of popular prayer used
today for this generation: Eucharistic Adoration with Praise
and Worship music and Taizé Prayer. These two particular
practices have been chosen due to their high success rate with
young people; it is hoped that analyses of both not only prove
the validity of the necessary elements as outlined in this paper,
but also offer ideas and methods of critique for those serving
this population in their own worship communities.

In recent years, a surge in the interest of Eucharistic adoration has abounded with the younger generation, much
to the puzzlement of their elders. Many people, particularly
those from the Vatican II era, wonder why young adults, of
all people, would find interest in what they perceive as an an-
tiquated, “high church” form of prayer. For them, it likely
recalls unpleasant memories of church: rigidity, high cer-
emonialism, incomprehensibility in what was taking place,
and perhaps even negative images of God. Clearly, these are
different times. Young people do not possess the “baggage”
and negative experiences many Vatican II Catholics have; they
tend to crave the sense of mystery in liturgy that has often
been lost with the reforms of Vatican II. Thus, an experience
that provides a sense of the holy and transcendent outside of
their everyday life is very appealing.

Eucharistic Adoration with Praise and Worship mu-
sic, therefore, bears great success; it meets young people’s
needs and fulfills the six criteria as presented in this paper.
The first, use of the arts and sensory experience, is encap-
sulated well. This prayer practice most often takes place in a
church or a small chapel. The visual elements include a beau-
tiful monstrance as the focal point, placed on an altar, usually
with candles on either side. The amount of sacred artwork is
dependent on each community’s worship space: some spaces
have beautiful statues, paintings, and stations of the cross on
the surrounding walls, and others bear a more noble simplic-
ity. A crucifix would likely be found somewhere in the space.
In addition, the priest’s presence evokes a high reverence and
sense of the sacred through the vestments worn, the ritual
gestures of kneeling, bowing, and genuflecting, as well as the
use of incense. All of these elements bear an ethereal quality,
one that very explicitly speaks to the mystery and transcen-
dence of God and, as such, is very appealing to young people.

The music used for these services varies; with Millen-
nials a more common trend seems to be the use of Praise and
Worship music along with perhaps one or two traditional Eu-
charistic hymns such as Tantum Ergo. The juxtaposition is
compelling yet logical for this generation: many young people
desire the “old,” sacred, and mysterious through Latin hymns
while also seeking music that speaks to the contemporary age,
culture, and experience in which they are living. While the
Latin hymns invite one to adore and worship in a more objec-
tive manner, Praise and Worship music highlights the personal
relationship with God, almost always employing the first per-
son voice as well as the present or future tense. The texts and
music are short, repetitive, and easy to remember and usually
evoke strong emotions. Theologically, the dominant image of
the texts is the risen and ascended Lord: little is mentioned
about the cross or anything negative, Trinitarian theology is
essentially non-existent, and references to the incarnation and
ministry of Jesus, his teaching, or even his passion are seldom,
if at all, mentioned. For these and other reasons, Praise and

56 Wuthnow, After the Baby Boomers, 223.
58 “Tantum Ergo” is the last two stanzas from the Latin, Eucharistic Hymn
“Pange Lingua” composed by Saint Thomas Aquinas. It is primarily used at
Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.
59 Bryan Spinks, The Worship Mall: Contemporary Responses to Contemporary
Worship music is often criticized as being superficial, banal, and possessing an almost “sickly sweet sentimentality in the ways that many of the songs speak of Jesus.” Nevertheless, used in the context of Eucharistic adoration, Praise and Worship music is very effective (and affective) and speaks well to the action that is taking place: adoring the Lord in personal, intimate devotion with others. The texts and music embody this, for the songs erode the distance between God and humanity, a clear stress on submission to power emerges in metaphor, theme and form, in the wider pursuit of fulfillment and power for the individual Christian, the Church, and ultimately, the human race.

A rhythm and ritual also takes place in Eucharistic adoration through songs, Scripture, prayers, ritual gestures, silence, and litanies; symbols are present in the crucifix (if one is present) and the true presence of Christ himself in the Blessed Sacrament. This prayer form is predictable and communal yet allows for a great deal of time and space for personal prayer and meditation. Hence, young people are able to enter into an experience of the divine and have the space to just sit, pray, and “be” with their Lord: all chaos, outside distractions, and pressures are left behind. Eucharistic adoration is powerful in its ability to offer an experience of both mystery and the transcendent paired with personal piety and devotion. In addition, both the personal and communal dimensions of prayer are experienced: the community sings together, recites prayers together, listens to Scripture together, while also praying and reflecting individually throughout the service. It brings together the best of both worlds.

The second prayer form that will be examined is Taizé Prayer. An ecumenical movement founded in the 1940s in Taizé, France, this prayer form gained wide acclaim across all corners of the globe from its inception. This style of prayer also utilizes the six categories outlined in this essay; here the artistic, sensory elements abound and with great success among this population. A wonderful ambience is created in Taizé Prayer: the space is quite dark, and candles, icons, and typically a large cross serve as the focal point in the front of the room. The seating arrangement varies; one can arrange the space that best serves any particular community. Often

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60 Ibid., 114.
61 Ibid.
people sit on the floor, while others may sit in chairs. Standing, however, does not typically occur for this kind of service.

Music is of key importance and greatly contributes to its success. Short, ostinato refrains are sung repeatedly in four-part harmony, while some pieces are sung in unison and often can be sung in canon. In addition, solo instruments of every kind play a large role, including stringed instruments, woodwinds, and brass, adding beauty to the experience. Percussion instruments, aside from the piano, would not be employed since the atmosphere is one conducive to quiet meditation through song. Carol Doran notes the success of Taizé Prayer’s music, stating “The ostinato music that has come to us from the Taizé community gives us a model of ritual music. It is singable by people of all ages, and its level of complexity excludes virtually no one from joining in the singing.”

Brother Roger, founder of the Taizé community, reaffirmed this idea through his own experience with young people.

What touches the young people in Taizé is perhaps the sense that we strive to make the expression of faith as simple as possible, without at the same time watering it down. They feel instinctively that the prayer proposed to them is not so much the translation into their own language of a reality that is foreign to them, but rather an invitation to a search that draws them onwards beyond themselves, that, by placing on their lips words from another age, gently forces them to decenter themselves, to empty themselves. Furthermore, participation in the singing is optional; often individuals enter in and out of the singing as the Spirit and prayer so move them, helping them enter deeper into an experience of God.

Like the music, the texts also play a critical role in touching the hearts of young people at prayer. Short and repetitive, the texts are chiefly drawn from Scriptures and are Christocentric. Similar to Eucharistic adoration, the verb tenses are in the present tense; and first person “I” and the second person “you” are also incorporated. God is invoked in prayer: “Come and fill our hearts with your peace”; imperative statements evoking comfort and encouragement are used, “Look to God, do not be afraid”; and Scripture that bears a personal nature is employed such as “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” or “Stay here and keep watch with me, the hour has come.”

Also, like Eucharistic adoration, the texts are not doctrinal, nor do they speak to the past of our ancestors in faith or God’s works throughout history. The emphasis is on the present moment. Brother Roger spoke of the power of the Scriptural texts in this way:

Prayer with the songs of Taizé is also meditation on the Bible. I am so surprised on All Saints’ Day, when our church is packed with French high-school students, to discover how naturally 2,500 young people sing words like “May I exult and rejoice in your love!” from one of the most recent songs written in French. I have the feeling that, by repeating one or two verses, the song opens for them a direct access to the Word of God and enables them to interiorize, to incorporate the beauty and even the “roughness” of the biblical words. And then, when words already known by heart are rediscovered by reading them, some texts are illuminated with an unexpected light.

In addition, Taizé Prayer is a ritual event that bears a pace and rhythm throughout the service as songs are sung, Scripture is read, time for silence is allowed, and petitions are offered. Usually the Lord’s Prayer is spoken near the end, and a ritual of venerating the cross—similar to the ritual many Christian communities perform on Good Friday—speaks very profoundly to the young people as they move forward to venerate and pray in the manner they choose. This use of ritual movement, gesture, and symbol proves very powerful, coupled with the ambience and meditative environment that has been created.

Again, like Eucharistic adoration, both the personal and corporate nature of prayer is embodied in this form. The community sings together, prays intercessory prayers together, listens to Scriptures, and observes silence while also being allowed—through these communal activities—to personally pray and reflect. The veneration of the cross is communal, yet very personal at the same time. Young people bring their own struggles and pain to the cross, and yet they feel strong solidarity and support with others through the communal nature of the event. The ability of the prayer form to simultaneously include both of these dimensions is unique and extremely effective and powerful for young people. This is affirmed through the testimony of Millennials themselves: in a survey given to high school youth who experienced many prayer forms including Taizé Prayer, Mass, Eucharistic adoration, Centering Prayer, and others, young people by far found Taizé Prayer the most meaningful. Their affinity to it included the following reasons from several individuals:

I could reflect on it and it actually meant something to me... it just let you see everyone coming together to comfort each other and the music was powerful... I like the veneration of the cross... it got me thinking and brought


66 Berthier, “In the Lord I’ll Be Ever Thankful” (Taizé, France: Ateliers et Presses de Taizé), 1991.


69 “Letter from Brother Roger.”
out a lot of emotions... I loved the sense of community; I felt very close to everyone and God! ... icons—the art was beautiful and I loved having time to reflect... the music set up the mood.\footnote{Jeffrey Kaster, “Youth in Theology and Ministry Evaluations,” email message to author, October 6, 2012.}

Perhaps one young women summarizes it best:

The music set up the mood. We weren’t being asked to clear our minds or sing or pray along with anybody. We could just feel God’s presence and physically touch the cross to make it more impactful.\footnote{Ibid.}

One can clearly see the strong effect of the symbols, ritual, and beauty, as well as how it afforded both a personal experience of God and solidarity with others. What these young people have experienced is a “prayer of the heart” as described by Brother Roger:

Another aspect that often touches me when I listen to young people speaking about the prayer in Taizé is the capacity that the time of silence in the middle of the liturgy has to give them the opportunity to focus on what is within them. They know how to describe what that silence makes possible: “to take stock,” “to listen to your heart,” “to think about your problems,” “to empty your mind,” “to take a break,” “to do some soul-searching,” “to drop your masks” … When they are together, they are not afraid of the silence.\footnote{“Letter from Brother Roger.”}

As an accessible, meditative prayer of the heart, Taizé Prayer touches young people in a way that seems elusive in other ritual forms. Without a doubt, it has been the most impactful form of prayer for young people I have seen in my ten years of ministerial experience working with the college population. While Eucharistic adoration with Praise and Worship music is also very meaningful for Millennials, it appears to attract those people who are more traditional in their ritual expression and more privy to Catholic devotions. Taizé Prayer, on the other hand, captures the hearts of all young people, whether practicing Catholics or those estranged from the Church. Additionally, the music never becomes banal—which has a tendency to happen for some with Eucharistic adoration—and the texts of Taizé Prayer are much more substantive theologically.

Personifying the postmodern world, Millennial Catholics are searching: they have a deep spiritual hunger for meaning, purpose, and truth not found in contemporary culture. Although some possess a naiveté about church authority and many are uninformed about their faith, they have a
sincere openness to spiritual experiences of all kinds. Labeling young people as “conservative” or “liberal” is counterproductive, reduces them to mere categories, and serves to more deeply polarize the Church. As the analysis of this generation and the two prayer forms have demonstrated, Millennial Catholics find meaning and spirituality in divergent practices and have an eclectic understanding of a variety of “liturgical styles.” So, too, we need to use creative initiatives that minister to their needs, their personal spiritual journey, and their life experiences so that they may find a home in the Church. As a young adult Catholic insightfully said, “understand that youth are not a monolith. This is something that I feel has often been forgotten by society, but it is especially important for our conversation about youth and Catholic music.”

There is much hope for this generation, for they bring many gifts and contributions to the universal Church. I conclude with insights offered by Caitlin Cusack, a college student and Catholic:

Youth across the world are spreading the light of Christ through means of community service, setting examples for other youth in today’s society, which is filled with temptations and unrealistic expectations, and, in turn, clearing a path for the next generation and the Church of tomorrow. The youth of today are welcoming more racial and cultural diversity into the Church as well as diverse musical styles. More youth are participating and becoming leaders in music ministry. The youth are alive and present in the Church today and are looking forward to the Church of tomorrow. We must embrace the mystery of our faith and listen for God always. And in order to live in harmony—with oneself, each other, and with God—we must have hope. We hope for the future of our personal faith and for the faith of the world—for we are one. But we should also have hope for the present: hope that every moment of every day we do not feel alone, for God is always with us. And God in Christ is our source of all hope and harmony until the end of time.

Amen!

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74 Ibid.