

## Different, Not Worse: Millennials' Engagement with the Church

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### A Bleak Picture

Some have charged that young adult Catholics (Millennials) do not look as “Catholic” as their predecessors. Consider the following statistics from our organization, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate<sup>1</sup>:

- Millennials and Generation Xers are the generations least likely to report attending Mass at least once a month or more frequently.
- Millennials are the least likely of any generation to say they find each of the sacraments (reconciliation, holy orders, anointing of the sick, confirmation, marriage, Eucharist, and baptism) to be “very meaningful.”

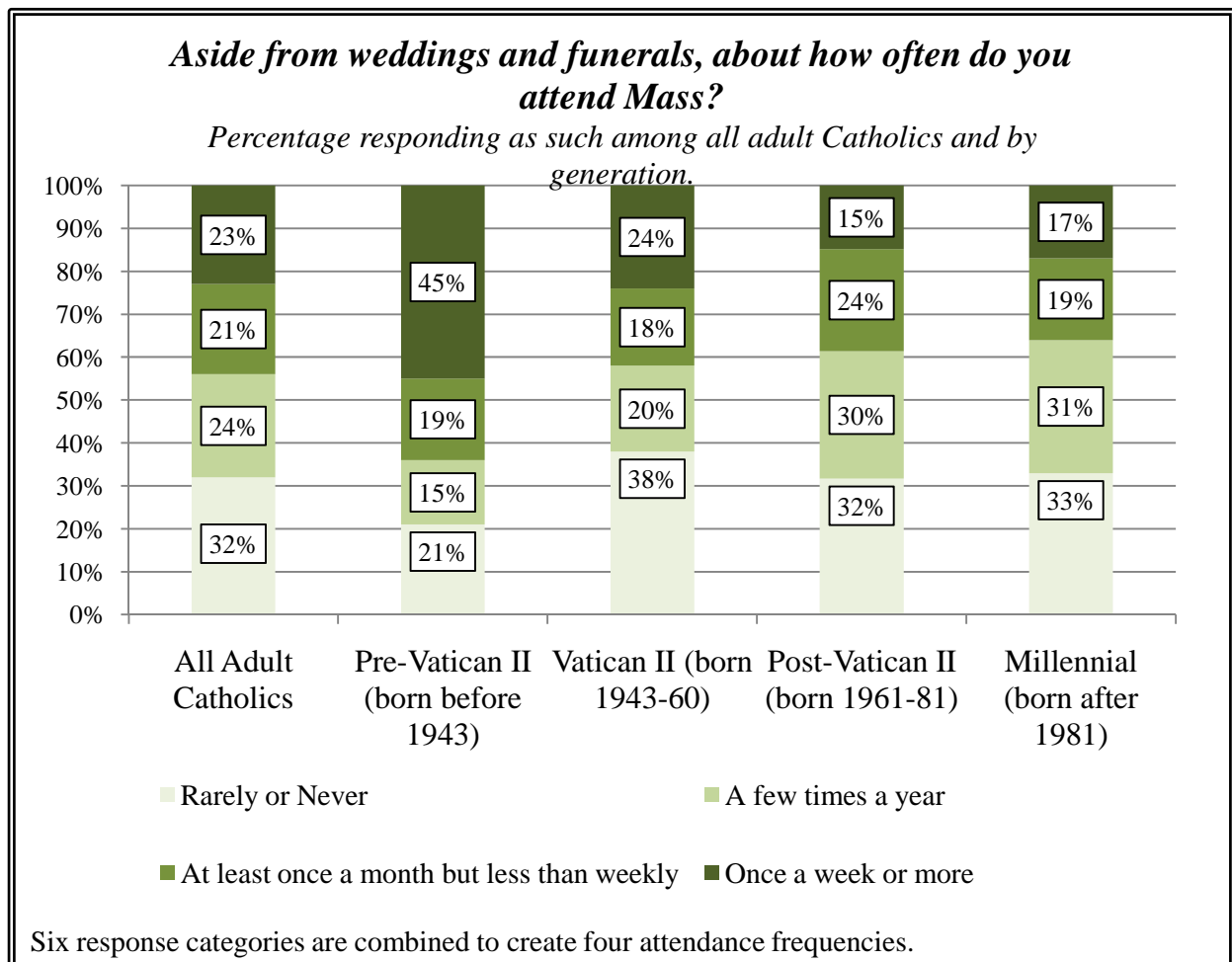


Figure 1: Used with permission, CARA (c) 2009

<sup>1</sup> All data from CARA's 2008 poll, *Sacraments Today: Belief and Practice Among U.S. Catholics*.

- Millennials are the least likely of any generation to say they find certain aspects of Mass, such as prayer and reflection, hearing the readings and the Gospel, and feeling the real presence of God, to be “very important.” This finding holds true even when controlling for those who attend Mass at least a few times a year.
- Millennials are most likely to agree “strongly” that one can be a good Catholic without going to Mass every Sunday.
- Millennials are the generation most likely to report having some doubt about the Trinity and God.

Given these figures, the future of the church as we know it now looks bleak. Less regular Mass attendance, coupled with a belief that Mass attendance (and, by extension then, parish life) are not essential to Catholicism are changing the face of the parish. Less emphasis on the sacraments, the Gospels, and even the Trinity and the existence of God do not bode well for the church as we know it.

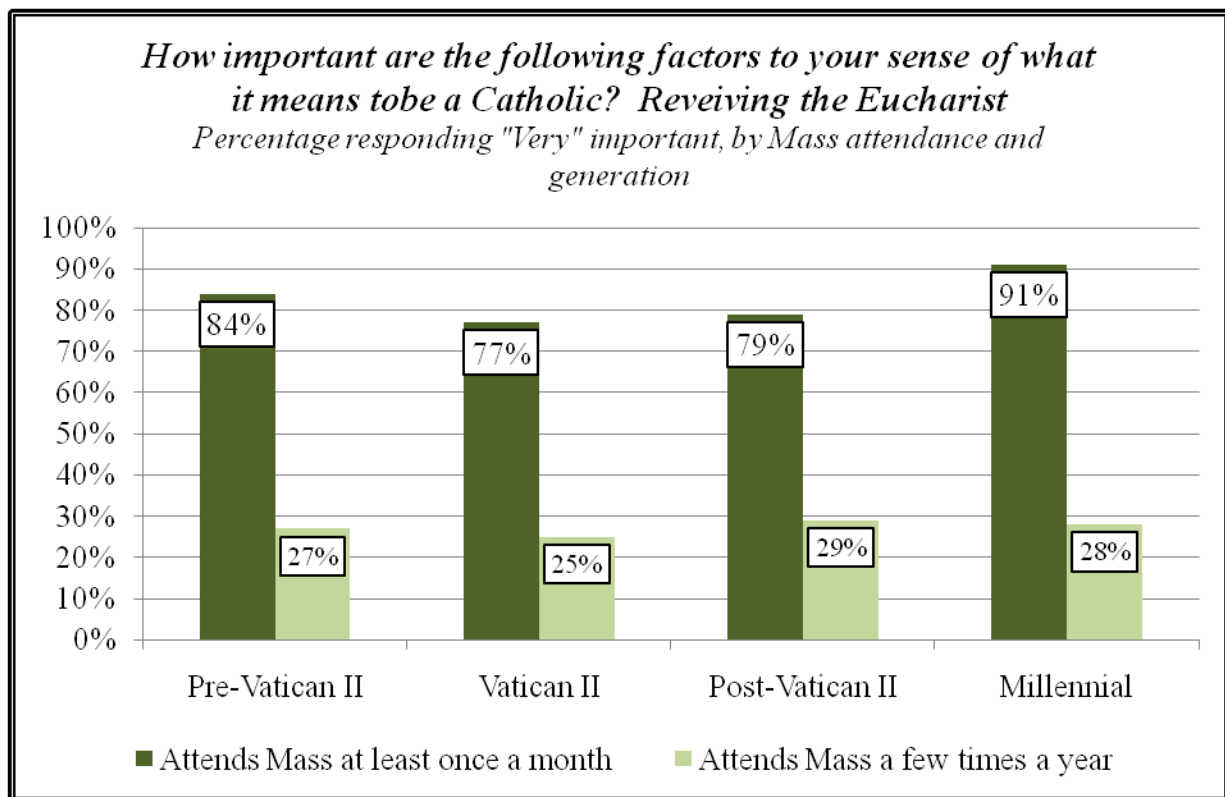


Figure 2: Used with permission, CARA (c) 2009

### As We Know It . . .

I would argue that the issue here is not that young adults are “bad Catholics.” Rather, researchers and church leaders are using “bad measures;” that is, definitions of what it means to be Catholic that are less salient to this generation. Consider, from the same research, the following:

- Millennials do not look all that different from previous generations with regard to receiving the sacraments. Millennials who attend Mass at least once a month are just as likely as other generations to “always” receive Eucharist when they go to Mass. Millennials attending Mass once a month or more are as likely as the Pre-Vatican II generation to believe that Jesus Christ is really present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist; in fact, Millennials report this belief at higher rates than both the Vatican II and the Post-Vatican II generations. Millennials also report participating in the sacrament of reconciliation at least once a year, at the same rates as Vatican II and Post-Vatican II generations.
- As for parish life, Millennials who are engaged with a parish are actively supporting parish life. For example, Millennials who attend Mass once a month or more are the most likely generation to report being “somewhat” or “very” involved in parish or other religious activities. And, Millennials who are not engaged with a parish look very similar to other generations who are not engaged with a parish. Millennials who attend Mass less than weekly are about as likely as other generations to agree “very much” that they do not believe that missing Mass is a sin.

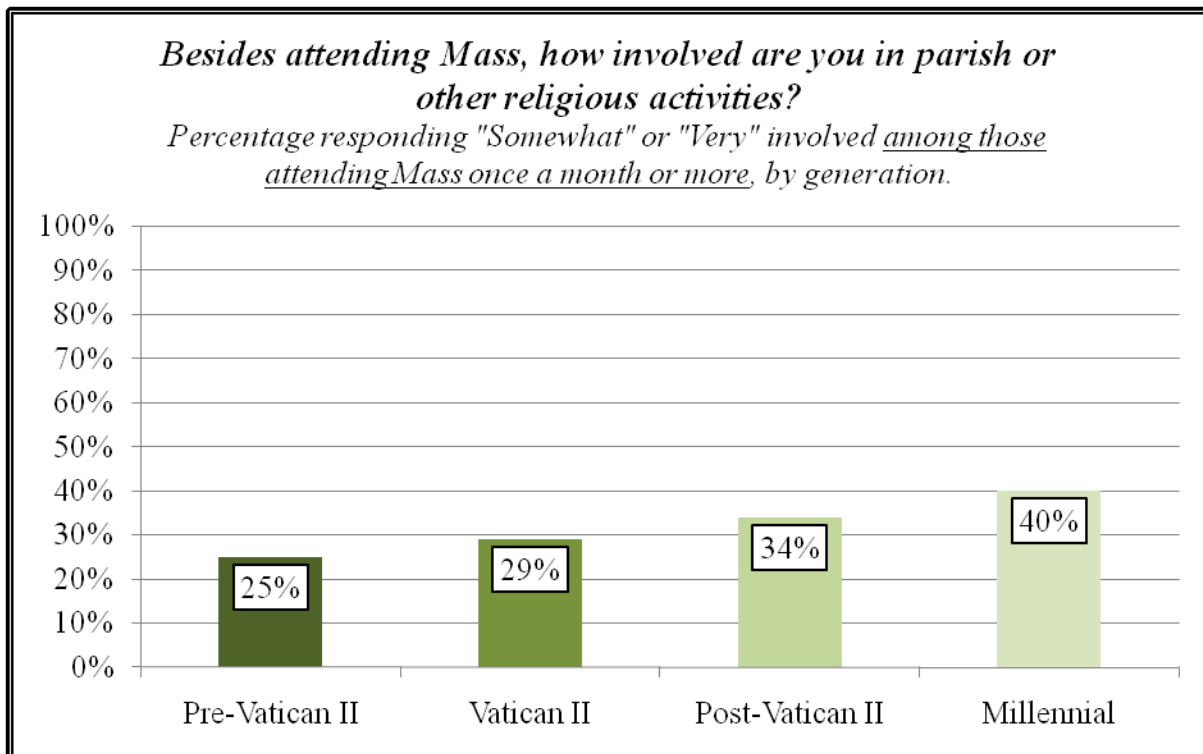


Figure 3: Used with permission, CARA (c) 2009

- The “cultural” components of Catholicism are engrained in Millennials as well. Millennials report the highest participation of any generation in certain Lenten practices, including abstaining from meat, receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday, giving up something other than meat, and making extra positive efforts during Lent, such as giving money to charity. Millennials are more likely than Vatican II or Post-Vatican II generations to say that they “strongly agree” that they look to the church’s teachings when deciding what is morally acceptable. Millennials are as likely as other generations to report that their Catholic faith is “the most important part” of their lives.

### **So, What’s Going on Here?**

It is interesting to note that, on some issues, Millennials are more similar to the Pre-Vatican II generation than the two generations directly preceding. Is this the product of increasing contact between generations? Life spans are lengthening, increasing the likelihood of Millennials to have repeated contact with their grandparents, members of the Pre-Vatican II generation. Or, is this return to the spiritual the result of the “dust settling” in the wake of Vatican II and other major societal shifts?

Whatever the cause, the result is an exciting time in the church: Millennials are coming of age at a time when Catholics have never been more socioeconomically stable, politically engaged, and culturally acceptable. New technologies – like the Paulists’ “Busted Halo,” Father Roderick’s “Daily Breakfast Podcast,” and email listservs and websites that connect members of young adult groups – create a unique opportunity to reach out to young adult Catholics in ways that are culturally and spiritually meaningful to them. Increasing connectivity, coupled with openness to the church, opens the door for more engagement with younger Catholics.

They are listening; the question, then, is “are we communicating the timeless and beautiful message of the church in a way that is salient to them?”