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Calling all Collegiates: A Study of Liturgical Engagement on College Campuses

Jessie Bazan
Marquette University

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Calling all Collegiates: A study of liturgical engagement on college campuses

By: Jessie Bazan

Sometimes it takes the radical intrusion of silence to truly listen. This genuine kind of listening is not simply an engagement in the repetitive transfer of sound waves. Instead, this listening demands an immersion into a deeper act of presence, one that requires both the giving and accepting of self. This sort of listening is rarely easy because it forces us to rescind some control. When we listen with our hearts, we are no longer the sole authors of our thoughts. For in the heart, it is the Spirit who penetrates our musings. The impending insights can be uncomfortable. They can be jarring. They can be challenging and enlightening and so incredibly beautiful. This is an essay about what I heard in my heart. It is an essay about forming the future leaders of the Church, a challenge that is certainly uncomfortable and jarring and so incredibly beautiful. How do we invite college students to be excited about the liturgy, the life-giving celebration of all that is good, in today's demanding world? Though difficult, I believe it can be done. It needs to be done. Despite a stimulus-driven college culture that makes community-building challenging, college campus ministries can strengthen their local liturgical communities by consistently promoting Masses, offering regular liturgical formation opportunities, and emphasizing hospitality.

Before getting too far into my analysis, I must define two terms repeated throughout this essay: universal Church and local liturgical community. First, the universal Church "is the Mystical Body of Christ, and this is an undivided body which is also present whole and entire in the local Eucharistic assembly and the particular church around its bishop" (Wood, 2000, p. 165). Through the graces of baptism, we become eternal members of the universal Church. In addition, I am using the term "local liturgical community" to refer to the worshipping

community that regularly gathers to celebrate Mass on a given college campus. This community is in some ways similar to a parish in that through the Eucharistic celebration, the Church is fully present. Even though these communities have less communal density than a parish, many of the same issues still apply. Involvement in local liturgical communities helps us experience the universal Church, which is why these communities are so vital to college campuses.

Admittedly, community-building on today's college campuses is challenging. In the 21st century, "participation is a property of culture" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 8). We are living in a participatory culture, a society inundated with technologies that enable us to connect and share. This type of culture "shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement," (Jenkins, 2009, p. 6) and this shift is certainly affecting college students. In fact, young people are the ones embracing this connected culture (Jenkins, 2009, p. 6). We see this especially among the active millennials populating today's college campuses. For years, "highly involved and scheduled millennial students have been shuttled to activities and lessons with very little free time and many continue to join numerous clubs and organizations on campus" (DeBard, 2004, p. 62). While it can be exciting to dabble in many different campus organizations, the over-committed student ultimately hurts group community building. A student's loyalties are stretched in so many different ways that the individual is not able to fully give of his or her time and talents to any one community. Thus, the quality of community interactions diminishes.

It is no wonder college students are over-committed, as the quantity of opportunities on any given campus is incredible. Students can participate in any number of student organizations, campus jobs, internships or the plethora of one-time event offerings on campus. It is unreasonable to expect a student to devote all of his or her time to one community when there are

so many events, guest speakers, free dinners, and athletic games happening on any given night. The stimuli on college campuses can be overwhelming. Another challenge to college community building comes courtesy of the education system itself. The traditional undergraduate is in and out of college in four years. There is turn-over every year due to graduation, transfers, and incoming freshmen enrollment. This constant rotation of students makes it very difficult to form strong communities.

Thus far, I have presented the challenges of general community-building on college campuses. There are, however, additional factors to consider regarding the formation of local liturgical communities on campuses because these communities cannot be “built,” per se. Each local liturgical community is a part of the universal Church. The universal Church is the body of Christ, an eternal community of baptized Christians (*Catechism*, para. 1267). Through the graces of baptism, Christians enter into “one People of God of the New Covenant which transcends all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races, and sexes: ‘For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body’” (*Catechism*, para. 1267). As Virgil Michel (1935) writes, “We are all [brothers and sisters] together who are intimately united in one Christ” (p. 541). The profoundness of our connection with fellow members of the body of Christ is unlike that of any other community, as the bonds of the universal Church stretch beyond human fellowship, relationship and time limitations because Christ’s presence is mediated in this community. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we are actively entering into the paschal mystery (Austin, 2000, p. 189). Christ is the one who connects us not only with those in our local liturgical community, but with all members of the universal Church, living and dead, and with God. The magnitude of this bond with fellow members of the body of Christ, the universal Church, is incomprehensible. It does not *have* to be a tangible bond. Baptized students do not *have* to know the people seated

around them in their local liturgical communities or be friends with the ministers serving them in order to be connected with the universal Church. We are already sacramentally bound to each other. Why, then, it is important for college campus ministries to form strong local liturgical communities? What is the need for fellowship among Mass-going students when membership in the universal Church is ultimately life giving?

There are three important benefits of local liturgical communities on campuses: they give students a community to associate with, offer a sense of belonging, and provide a support system of fellow young people answering the liturgical call to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The most basic benefit is the opportunity for group association, a vital aspect of human life. The Social Identity Theory (from the communication and psychology disciplines) “suggests that a person’s self-concept is comprised of a personal identity (e.g. body characteristics, psychological behaviors) as well as a social identity (e.g. affiliation with a group)” (West & Turner, 2010, p. 468). As humans, we shape ourselves in large part based on the groups we are in. Group formation “is natural to humans,” considering the ultimate reason community groups exist are to “meet important human needs” (Galanes & Adams, 2007, p. 5). Communities give humans a sense of worth and also the resources to act beyond individual capabilities. The communities people are part of “provide the vehicle by which the individual can make a contribution to the organization and society as a whole” (Galanes & Adams, 2007, p. 5). The local liturgical communities formed on college campuses should be communities students feel compelled to associate with because community life is already such a big part of the human (and specifically college) experience. Research shows this generation of college students is especially drawn to community membership. Millennials are characterized as team-oriented (DeBard, 2004, p. 37). We generally enjoy coming together and collaborating with each other (DeBard, 2004, p. 37).

Therefore, campus ministries should take advantage of this natural community-orientation and work to establish fellowship among local liturgical community members and an atmosphere to which students feel drawn. Having a basic community structure in place will not only meet student needs, but it will be a first step in engaging students more deeply in the universal Church. We must begin with structures students can comprehend.

Beyond the basic association aspect, local liturgical communities benefit students by offering them a sense of belonging. This is important because “the social fabric of community is formed from an expanding shared sense of belonging” (Block, 2009, p. 9). The need to belong to a community is especially vital for young students who are away from home for the first time. Strong secondary liturgical communities can fill that need. For example, a verbal greeting before Mass explicitly affirms that the student is a known, welcomed part of the community. That interpersonal connection can make a significant impact on an individual, especially on a college campus where sheer size often makes it easy to get lost in the crowd. The feeling of belonging is palpable during Mass as well because the nature of the liturgy is so communal. Movements like standing, sitting, and kneeling, and gestures like the sign of the cross and the profound bow during the Creed are made by the congregation in unison. Similarly, verbal responses like “And with your Spirit” and “Amen” are said together. Collective movements and prayers show that being part of the local liturgical community necessitates belonging to something bigger than the individual (Galanes & Adams, 2007, p. 7). Belonging can also be communicated physically, such as by joining hands during the Our Father or giving a hug during the sign of peace. Communication research shows “touch is a rich medium of social exchange and through it, individuals form strong attachments and cooperative alliances” (Hertenstein & Keltner, 2011, p.

70). When students are connecting with fellow students vocally and physically, their need for belonging is met.

Finally, strong local liturgical communities are important on college campuses because they offer students a support system of fellow young people answering the call of their faith to announce the good news of Jesus Christ. It is from that call that “the church is born of water and blood, death and new life, Jesus and the Spirit. The same Spirit that empowered the first followers continues to grace Christians today in the path of discipleship” (Cahalan, 2010, p. 22). Christ operates through the Church, which means he operates through the assembled disciples, a remarkable gift considering our imperfections. Humans are limited. We are broken. In spite of this, we have been given the colossal responsibility to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the rest of the world (Harrington, 2001, p. 88). In baptism, “we assume a responsibility to live in the world and for the world in such a way as to contribute to its transformation in accordance with God’s will” (Searle, 2006, p. 30). We are reminded of this baptismal responsibility during the liturgy, when we are sent away with the call to “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life” (*Roman Missal*, 2011, p. 673). This mission to proclaim the gospel of Jesus is certainly not easy, especially for young, inexperienced college students, so when we consider how imperfect human beings can best fulfill this call with the gifts, talents, and limits we have, the local liturgical community becomes imperative. First and foremost, we rely on the graces of the universal Church for ultimate support. But we students also rely on members of our local liturgical community like priests to educate us, like lay ministers to welcome us, and like the man in the front pew to inspire us as we try to live out this mission. The more we develop interpersonal relationships with members of the community and form a group identity, the more we can trust their education, embrace that welcome and be motivated to act on that inspiration.

It is now established that while community building is certainly challenging on college campuses, supportive communities like local liturgical communities can be very beneficial to students. What, then, should campus ministries do next? Based on my research and ethnographic studies, I have developed three ways to build strong secondary liturgical communities on campuses: consistently promote campus Masses, regularly offer liturgical formation opportunities, and emphasize hospitality among ministers. First, students must be aware of the Mass logistics (i.e. time, date, location) in order to actually attend Mass. It may sound strange, but in today's stimulus-filled college culture, campus ministries need to "market" the Mass just like any other student organization would advertise for an event. This entails keeping up with promotional trends and being creative when it comes to advertising for Mass. Even in today's digital age, personal invitations (either verbal or written) still go a long way in forming community connections. Additionally, popular social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are valuable for sending out short Mass time reminders. The first step is figuring out what method of communication is most effective at a given college and then being consistent with the promotion. Student development offices and communication professors can be good resources for arranging effective communication plans.

Second, regular formation offerings are important for the development of local liturgical communities because these opportunities help students develop a deeper understanding of liturgical practices and rituals. Students arrive to college with vastly varying knowledge about topics like the liturgy, the institutional Church and sacraments because the reality is, not all grade school and high school catechetical formation programs are completely effective. Therefore, campus ministries should take advantage of the fact that they are situated in an environment already conducive to learning and teaching, and educate students on the liturgy. Give students

the information they need to form their own opinions and thoughts on the liturgy, faith, and matters of the Church. True engagement has to come from within. Young people need the resources and guidance to begin to understand that the liturgy matters—not simply because it is something they have grown up going to or because their parents told them it was important—but because the celebration of the Eucharist is truly life-giving. If we want to have a genuinely engaged Church with active leaders in the coming years, we need young people to be properly educated first.

Third and most important, college campus ministries can form strong secondary liturgical communities by emphasizing hospitality among ministers at Mass. At St. John's University, the Benedictine value of hospitality means “to offer warmth, acceptance, and joy in welcoming others,” so as to “let all...be received by Christ” (*Rule*, 2001, p. 53). I experienced that hospitality first-hand on a recent campus visit. My first night in Collegeville, I attended Mass with the monks. I was there by myself, hundreds of miles from home, and I will never forget how grateful I was when one of the monks approached me before Mass with a warm smile. He welcomed me into his home and engaged me in conversation, asking where I was from and what drew me to St. John's. Then, he made sure I knew what songs we were singing. That simple act of hospitality was profoundly touching, and can be replicated by other religious and lay ministers alike. Imagine how beautiful a campus local liturgical community could be if sincere hospitality was practiced by all. In the New Testament, “it was the exercise of hospitality that greatly facilitated the Christian mission and made Christian communities attractive to those in search of acceptance and love in Christ” (Harrington, 2001, p. 140). Hospitality is an integral element of engagement. There will always be students who do not read their emails, pay attentions to flyers, or have time to come to additional education sessions, but when they do come to Mass, these

students can be engaged through a smile and a welcome. That interpersonal engagement matters, as the initial greeting can set the tone for the rest of the Mass experience. Campus ministers should recruit and train hospitality ministers who act as “official greeters,” to welcome students, help people find seats, and create a comfortable atmosphere (Comiskey, 2004, p. 7). Hospitality is such a valuable ministry and one that can bolster the strength of a college’s local liturgical community.

Promotion of campus Masses, regular liturgical education opportunities and emphasizing hospitality are three ways for college campus ministries to build strong local liturgical communities. In today’s stimulus-driven college culture, I believe these three tactics can help successfully engage young people in the liturgy. But we cannot stop here. The world is constantly in flux, changing with every new movement, leader and innovation. What will our college students need to be engaged in the liturgy 20 years from now? We do not know yet and we do not need to know yet. What we need is for this topic to remain important in the minds of Church leaders. We need to constantly be thinking, evaluating, questioning, and listening. Listening even when it is uncomfortable. Listening when it is jarring. Listening when it is beautiful. The Spirit works in incredible ways. Just listen with the ear of your heart.

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