

Along the track

Is there anything left in which we can all believe?

Last year a very comprehensive study focussing on young Catholics was undertaken across the US. The study asked: Why are young Catholics going, going, gone? Much of what was revealed was not only about young people but it could well apply to Catholics of all ages.

"The focus on people finding community in a society that's increasingly disparate is intense," said Josh Packard, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Northern Colorado. "On the one hand, you've got people looking for community. On the other, they feel judged and can never be a part of it."

The panelists at the presentation reported that, again and again, what they heard from young people was that a fear of being judged keeps them from joining a church, yet they desire a spiritual connection just the same. An essential part of the desire for that spiritual connection is negated by a structure that doesn't allow for questioning or conversation. That is also driving young people (and others) away.

The fact that people are seeking community, a spiritual connection is encouraging especially in times when divisions appear to be increasing, where differences are highlighted, where disagreements grow out of proportion. In such times we can look to authority figures to tell us what to do and think – to give us certainty. That may work for some. Or we can go in search of common ground, seeking the beliefs that unite us, what brings us together, what gives us common purpose and action.

We can begin by asking: Is there anything which we can all believe in? How can we build unity and solidarity rather than drifting apart or deepening divisions? Nearly half (46 per cent) were looking for another faith expression or practice that better aligns with their sense of spirituality, structures that enable people to explore ideas, to listen to each other (and God), where people who are searching feel as equally welcome as those who are comfortable with what they believe.

In my early years religion was a source of great division and mistrust – Catholics were mistrustful of Protestants and vice versa, as was mistrust of people of Jewish faith. In a few short years that began to change radically as we started to pray together, to talk and listen, to try to understand what others believed and why, and to find common ground, where we found points of unity and understanding. We discovered that the role of religion was not to divide, to separate those who were 'wrong' and those who were 'right' but that faith and religion worked to grow our spirits rather than feed our fears. The treatment of those of the

Muslim faith so often grows from fear and ignorance rather than seeking understanding of our common search for God, for meaning in life.

Australia has been one of the most successful multi-cultural, multi faith communities in the world. That ought not be taken for granted. We still have to work at it. Today there are forces, overt and subtle that are working against that. We are a people of many colours, cultures and gifts that have enriched one another's understanding of life. That will continue if we reject those who wish to set one against the other and we continue to be a nation that seeks to reach out to others with generosity and compassion.

It is important then, that sometimes we ask ourselves what is it that we can all believe in? What is it that we hold in common, that we treasure? There is still room for differences, still room to be enriched by other cultures and customs. We might also ask: Is my faith and confidence in a loving God such that I am open to exploring ideas and new ways of seeing and appreciating God, is it strong enough that I can live with doubt and ambiguity?

If people are seeking a community to which they might belong, what kind of faith community might we offer them?

Is it a faith community:

- that is a genuinely welcoming community
- that has a place for people of all ages, with a tangible concern for those in need, the lonely, the sick and the aged?
- that offers ways of encouraging us to deepen and enrich our own faith and our understanding of other's search for God?
- that is open to those who are seeking and so offers a trusting space where there is conversation free of judgment, free of imposition?
- that encourages discussion and the sharing of ideas and does not always seek answers?
- that is characterised by genuine outreach to others and is not simply about its own self preservation?
- that offers a variety of ways to gather, to pray and worship?

Regards
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