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An Inquiry at the Millennial Youth Spiritual Identity: Experiences of DLSU Students

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Abstract:

The discourse on religion in modernity has continued into the new millennium. The future of religion in pluralistic modernity has been the subject of inquiries. As in any human institution, the future continuity of Christian churches hinges on the new generation of believers. The research project proposes that Christian spirituality among the millennial Filipino youth in De La Salle University continues to survive due to the support of institutions that provide venues for public ritual and private reflections among youth students. This study explores and describes the experiences of the Millennial young people in the Catholic university while they engage in different religious activities. Further, the study scrutinizes the impact of these religious engagements and draws the attention to this continuing significance in finding meaning in the process; consequently, describes their spiritual identity. The interpretative phenomenological qualitative research follows a batch of 21 random students from various colleges as they undergo religious activities at the university and draws from the insights of theology, psychology and reflexive analysis to provide an understanding of millennial youth spiritual identity.

Key Words: Youth Spirituality; Millennial Youth; Spiritual Identity; Religion; Youth and Religion

1. INTRODUCTION

Questioning the proposition that modernity and secularism go together, Berger (2001, p. 445) notes the contrary trajectory of modernity, that “most of the world is bubbling with religious passions” and that there are “powerful revitalizations” among major religious communities, which include Islamic diasporas, traditional Christian churches (such as the Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox), Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists. This view supports by Casanova's (1994) proposition that religion is undergoing deprivatization. From the confinement of private belief and space, religion is once again moving towards public spaces and to engage with crucial issues of

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De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines February 16, 2017



today. While these propositions have examined in some localities, such as Wales (Chambers and Thomson 2005), they have rarely been seen much less discussed regarding their relevance to the study of youth, communities, and spirituality.

The generation of the youth today also called the millennial youth, is the subject of interest by researchers and academicians on account of their significantly large demographic composition that exceeds half of the Philippine population (ECY, The National Filipino Catholic Youth Survey 2013). The youth are also considered as significant contributors to the work of social transformation as "they shape social and economic development, challenge social norms and values and build the foundations of the world's future" (UN Volunteers, Newsletter, 2014). The Catholic Church also describes the youth as those who belong to the age bracket from 13-39 years old (ECY, Ka-Lakbay: Directory for Catholic Youth Ministry in the Philippines, 2004). Republic Act 8044 defines the youth of the Philippines as those who are 15-30 years old (Sandoval, Mangahas, & Guerrero, 1996).

Howe and Strauss called the young people in this generation as millennials, those who are born from 1981 and whose parents are part of the Boomer generation (born between 1943 and 1960) (Egeler, 2003). Dr. Egeler (2003) further added that the research of Howe and Strauss reveals interesting results contrasting the attitudes and behaviors that characterized as Boomers with that of the millennials. The research further manifests a past counter trends but a positive one. Recent studies characterized millennials as educated, tech-savvy, well-travelled, and cosmopolitan with their choices in life (Cornelio, 2016). Interestingly, the youth generation of today has a unique identity as shown in several studies and researches. Howe and Strauss (2000) believed that the current generation known as millennial generation offers good news rather than negative stereotypes attributed to them by the former generations such as the GI generation (born between 1901 and 1924), the Silent Generation (born between 1925 and 1942), the Boomer generation (born between 1943 and 1960), and the Xer generation (born between 1961 and 1981). The millennial youth as articulated by Howe and Strauss has broken the previous generation sharply as indicated in their attitudes and behavior. Young people the in the millennial generation are described to be positive about life, involved in family, friendships and political structures (Sahlin, 2008). They attend church about as often as their parents do and have adopted much the same set of values and religious beliefs (Sahlin, 2008). It is a premise that these young people are engaging with various social and political issues. The Pew Research Center in 2012 stressed that Christianity is the predominant religious affiliation comprising 32 % of the world population. Consequently, young people cannot be expected to be passive in engaging beliefs and practices, thus creating new marks of Christianity with fluency and authenticity (Cornelio, 2016).

Many studies show that there is a continuing vibrancy of religion for young people. A Study in the UK revealed that instead of being an entirely secularizing force, universities created a space that fostered religiosity in the campus (Cornelio, 2016). The study moreover mentioned that a huge number are unchurched students but high in various areas such as frequently praying, Bible reading and engagement in Christian activities in the University (Cornelio, 2016). Cornelio (2016) further stressed that what Christianity undergoes for young people is, in fact, a transition regarding how they view and embody religion. The UK Youth on Religion study shows that the largest proportion of adolescents who profess to be Christian are flexible advocates. These are believers willing to accommodate to their faith multiple world views such as science and other moral codes as convinced that some Christianity's traditions may be dated (Cornelio, 2016). In Poland, Mandes and Rogaczewska (2013) argue that the conservatism of the Catholic Church on sexual morality and the traditional family set up explains the decline in the sacramental participation of its young adults. However, instead of leaving the Catholic Church, they still participate in different religious gatherings such as local feasts, festivals, and pilgrimage which they consider their occasions of faith.

In some studies, they claimed that the millennial youth perceive religion as not an obligation but a choice. Religious labels are unnecessary to them, enjoy a variety of different religious activities and practices, value the religious experience more than in a codified set of beliefs, and interested in the authenticity of the people when

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De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines February 16, 2017



they join religious groups or communities (Religion and Youth, 2000). One important point to note is that youth and Christianity characterize by some researchers as the weakening thesis or a phenomenon that religiosity is declining. The study shows a decline in religious affiliation and participation, a more selective approach to prescribed beliefs and moral issues, and the increased possibility of abandoning their Christian identity (Rausch, 2006).

There are studies also that make exact qualifications to the weakening thesis. A more recent and nuanced survey shows that while American Millennial Catholics agree that "being a Catholic is an important part of who I am, and not find the papacy very meaningful." Also, a sizeable proportion of Hispanic and non-Hispanic Millennial Catholics say that Mass is very significant, but only a few of them attend on a weekly basis. In the USA, this example illustrates the condition of believing without belonging that Davie (1994) initially documented in the UK as mentioned by Cornelio (2016). In some countries especially in the West, religion among young people is increasingly challenged.

In the south or Asia, especially in the Philippines, religion is important as revealed in the interest of youth in the religious activities and rituals. Giving an idea what the Filipino millennials are doing, the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines – Episcopal Commission on Youth (CBCP-ECY) has studied the religiosity of the Filipino youth. The study found out that engaging religious activities are one of the main operations of the Filipino Youth (ECY, The National Filipino Catholic Youth Survey 2013). The study further stressed that while young people observed religious activities and practices, they have companions with them normally friends or family members.

For Cornelio (2016), he stretched the concept of Filipino millennials as those who likes to eat, pray, and love. They are not only disposed to buying gadgets or food tripping; they too can be individualistic but not necessarily self-centered. Cornelio (2016) further added that their attachment to new technology and gadget would seemingly define the millennials as egocentric, however, they are not self-seeking. They also want activities that give meaning to their lives. Passion is the real description of them as described by Cornelio (2016). Even the American youth specialist, Kenda Creasy Dean (2004) believed that young people have so much passion. She categorized the dimension of the passion of the young people according to their longing for fidelity, longing for transcendence and longing for communion. These dimensions are essential to understanding better the millennial youth. In matters of spirituality, Cornelio (2016) further claimed that young people in the Philippines have their personal religious meaning as they engage religious activities individually and as a personal experience as well. Cornelio (2016) characterized them as Creative Catholics both believing and belong. He further claimed that they are more progressive and adventurous. "They are willing to stand up, speak against, and challenge the Church and its priests and bishops in a way that would have been unthinkable in previous generations" (Cornelio, 2016, p. 60).

Interestingly, Estanislao (2014) revealed in her study on Assessing Lasallian Spirituality of University Students that majority of the university students believe that there is a supreme being. The study further showed that many responses were showing a belief in God by engaging religious activities such as going to Church, reading the scriptures, joining religious organizations and doing charitable works (Estanislao, 2014). There is a strong sense of service to the community through sharing their talents by volunteering or through a community engagement projects. Finally, the study noted that students in the De La Salle University are conscious of the people in the community and willing to share together the mission of spreading God's love and salvation (Estanislao, 2014).

Thus, this phenomenological qualitative research hopes to demonstrate similar results from other studies but in distinctively Philippine Catholic University and Lasallian contexts. This study specifically explores and describes the millennial youth of De La Salle University as they engage different religious activities and rituals. Further, it explores the meaning-making of their engagement. Specifically, the research will respond to the

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Manila, Philippines February 16, 2017



following questions: How do the Lasallian millennial youth engage in religious activities? Why do the millennial youth engage in these religious activities? How do these religious activities give meaning to the millennial youth? What are the spiritual characteristics of the Lasallian millennial youth?

Through online and group interviews analyzed thematically, the study would consequently yield millennial spiritual identity.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

The study is qualitative in nature. It employed the inductive phenomenological approach. Online interviews, as well as a group interview, were conducted to the respondents. The data were coded and thematically classified. The study as well employed the narrative and reflexive analysis to come up with the results.

2.2. Study Population

The research was conducted by 21 random students from different colleges of the university as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Tally of student interviewees

College	Gender		Religion		Campus		Total
	Male	Female	Roman Catholic	Protestant	Taft	STC	
RVR-COB	5	1	6	-	5	1	6
BAGCED	2	-	2	-	2	-	2
CCS	1	-	-	1	1	-	1
GCOE	4	1	5	-	2	3	5
CLA	3	3	6	-	6	-	6
SOE	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
COS	1	-	1	-	1	-	1
COL	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	16	5	20	1	17	4	21

2.3. Instrument

The researcher conducted the interview through Facebook messenger. Interview questions were derived from the research questions that contained the following variables: Religious activities which is defined in this study as practices, rituals or activities that are religious and spiritual in nature such as Holy Mass, Praise and Worship, Prayer Services, Taizé Prayer, Personal Prayers and others; Purpose of the engagement; Meaning-Making; and Spiritual Identity. The interview questions started with their basic profile and a question on the top 5 religious activities that they are engaged. This first interview question led the researcher to probe

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines February 16, 2017



on the most important religious activity that they are involved in and their reasons. The second interview question focused on the reasons for engaging religious activities. The third interview question dealt with the changes the religious activities have brought to their lives, probing on the life-changing experiences of the respondents. The fourth issue was simply a question on their idea or image of God. There was also a group interview with another set of participants. Same questions were given to the new round of participants.

2.4. Data Gathering and Procedure Analysis

The data from Facebook messenger were transferred to the word document in tables per interview questions. Group Interview was transcribed and transferred as well to the word document in tables per interview questions. In line with the research questions, the researcher focused on the 4 variables: Religious Activities, Purpose of Engagement, Meaning-Making and Spiritual Identity. Since this is a qualitative research (Mason, 2002), the researcher made a thorough reading of the data and narratives, highlighted beautiful words, dialogues used, actions and setting systems. Then, these ideas were classified according to thematic words or dialogues and movements per variable. From there, the researcher proceeded to reflexive and narrative analysis. Theories and thoughts from other researchers were included in the discussion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented to describe the millennial youth of De La Salle University regarding their spiritual identity. The results presented are based on the variables as follows:

Religious Activities

The results show that most essential religious practices in the university are going to Holy Mass, Personal Prayers, Praise and Worship, and Confession as shown in Table 2.1. The researcher categorized these answers as personal endeavors since these activities do not require students to attend.

Table 2.1 Most Significant Religious Activities

<i>Personal Endeavors</i>	Total
Attendance to Holy Mass	7
Personal Prayers	4
Praise and Worship	2
Confession	1

Other mass-based programs organized by Theology and Religious Education Department (TRED) or Lasallian Pastoral Office (LSPO) highlighted as significant religious activities. Although the majority of these programs require students to participate or students get involved freely, the respondents still considered them as significant.

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines February 16, 2017



Table 2.2 Most Significant Religious Activities

<i>Mass-based Religious Program</i>	Total
TREDONE	1
LASARE1	1
Youth Encounter	2
Search In	2
Retreats	1
eSCAlate	1
Taizé Prayer	1

Asking them as to why these activities are significant, many of them believe it has spiritual benefits. Such in a case of one respondent, she considered Holy Mass as the most important religious practice as it “provides a sort of escape from troubles” and it provides her at ease and calms down. Another respondent declared that Personal Prayer is most important since “it gives me a sense of fulfillment in such a way where I feel guided and loved always.” Other students find the religious activities significant when it offers them opportunities to mold their character and “become closer to God, family and friends”.

It is interesting to note that respondents have a higher appreciation of religious practices which are not required by a class or the university. Many of them who are engaged in religious activities are doing on their free will. Seemingly, they are even appreciative on how God works in them as revealed in their life changing stories. A respondent shared to the researcher how blessed he is for having God in his life. The respondent said: “If there is one life-changing experience that happened to me, I think it is when I consider God as part of my daily life. When I thank Him for everything that He has done for me and for my family and friends. For all the blessings, I have received that helped and molded me to be a better version of myself.”

Another highlight to remember is the idea of the respondents to be inclusive rather than exclusive. There is a strong conviction that faith can be learned by open to all activities and possibilities. One respondent said: “I think yung best para sa akin ay yung escalate because applicable siya sa lahat, unlike sa other activities, may connotation na pang catholics or christian lang ang mga activities na iyon. Though I have nothing against that, based from my personal experience, faith is parang isang process wherein yung tao ang naghahanap nun mismo. It cannot be injected or taught in a session or a day.” Rituals seemed to be uninteresting to the millennial respondents. However, silence and solemnity touched the hearts of the millennials. The Taizé way of praying offers moments of silence that made some millennials keep “calm and relaxed”.

Purpose of Engagement

The reasons for engagement are categorized according to 5 themes:

Longing for God

- Love for God
- Faith tells me what to do
- Grace & unfailing love of God
- Loving God

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines February 16, 2017



Talk to God
Closer to God

Longing for Life/Spiritual Satisfaction

Discover my main purpose
Spiritual nourishment that I receive
Satisfy my spiritual hunger
Escape from troubles
Maintaining a balance: academically, financially & spirituality

Longing to Know & Learning to Follow

Skeptical about God
Curiosity
Required by parents
Requirements from class

Longing for Friendship and communion with others

People I inspire
Feeling of community
Prayer with people & relate with them
The people I am with
Meet new people
Draw closer to the people
Feel that community can be their home
Animators/Coordinators

Longing for answers

When I see results
Energy booster
Because of my problems
When in need
More of a need than a want

Results of the research question on the purpose of engagement reveals many characteristics. Striking to the researcher is that all their reasons are all longings and desires. For Dean (2004) these are called passion. The researcher summarized them into five themes as follows: Longing for God, Longing for Life and Spiritual Satisfaction, Longing for Intimacy and communion with others, Longing for Answers and Longing to Know and Learning to Follow.

The researcher notes that the millennial youth may not be able to define what they long for; however, they get attracted to the many opportunities our institutions offer to them, probably suitable to their passion and longings.

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines February 16, 2017



Meaning-Making of their Engagement

Answering the question what changes the religious activities have brought to their lives and asking them their life changing stories, the researcher had identified seven themes and five subthemes from their narratives.

Personal Need/Satisfaction

Spiritual Need/Satisfaction

Gives a sense of fulfillment
Give me comfort & security
Guided & loved always
Need for my soul
Gives guidance

Material Need/Satisfaction

Solve problems in my life
Achieved academic goals
Passed the exams

Silence & Reflection

Think of my sins
Silence
Reflect
Alone time
Can find silence & time to reflect

Hope

Hold on to hope
Prepare for the day

Opportunities to change perspectives in life, Church and God

My view on everyday life was affected
Helped see the other side of the Church
Changed my perspective
Personal change: Made me understand more of what is happening to my life
Shed light to my close-minded views on God

Character Formation

Personal Growth

Changed much my character
Helped & molded me to a better version of myself
Reborn
Became a good boy
Helped me grow as a person

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines February 16, 2017



Openness & Establish Good Relationship with Family, Friends & Others

More open to discuss things
More responsible with everyday discussion
More engaging
Open towards others
Appreciate my parents
Value my family & friends
Made me closer to peers
Molded me to become closer to friends & family

Positive Disposition

Uplifting & positive
Became reflective
Peace of mind
Give me a better feeling than that of the others

Moral Transcendence

Learn more about life and lessons
Don't masturbate anymore
Became charitable

Awakening Social Awareness & Responsibility

Extending help to others
Think about problems/things that are wrong either with me/society/world
Develop sensitivity for others

Sense of Belongingness/Community

More communal sense
Helped a part of the community
Exposed the Lasallian Core Values & be part of the Lasallian community

Growing in Personal Relationship with God

Intimate/Quiet moments with God
Gave new perspective about my faith
Closer to God
Truly grow in a personal relationship with God
Molded me to become closer to God
Helped me bring closer to God
Faith is what makes every humans going

Recognizing God's presence in one's life

Recognizing God in our lives
Maintain my connection with God
Witnessed the most powerful & significant miracle

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines February 16, 2017



Open to all that discovers faith
Greatest spiritual benefit
Keep me connected with God
Praising God
Get to communicate with him more

What these religious activities mean to the millennial youth is very necessary as it reveals many meanings to them. To the millennial youth, it is about Character Formation that includes opportunities for personal growth, openness to establish good human relationships, positive disposition in life and moral transcendence. One respondent stated that religious activity helped him "changed his character" and "helped him grow as a person." The desire to maintain good relationships with others is compelling evidence that these religious activities have helped them. They become, as cited by respondents "more open to others" and "value my friends and family." Moreover, the religious activities seemingly provided them the opportunity to be bonded spiritually. It is also believed that engaging these religious activities keep them to be morally upright as they "do not masturbate anymore" or "they become charitable."

Another important theme that emerged is the awakening of social awareness and responsibility. Respondents cited that they "develop the sensitivity for others". A strong appreciation on community building is also a highlight of the theme. The engagement paved them the way to be "part of the community" and apparently, millennials appreciate this much.

Finally, recognizing God's presence in one's life is one important theme that emerged from the narratives. Many respondents cited that "maintaining a connection with God" and "being open to all" revealed that recognizing God's presence matters a lot. This desire is expressed through growing in personal relationships with God.

4. CONCLUSIONS

There seem to be interesting results as to the kind of religious activities the millennial youth in De La Salle University are engaged. The findings of the study of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines - Episcopal Commission on Youth (2013) on the Catholic Filipino Youth religiosity is indeed affirmed that millennials still engaged religious activities and practices. The literature citing the weakening of religious socialization (Rausch, 2006) may not be faithful to all. The millennials are even more spiritual than religious as affirmed by the study of Cornelio (2016).

Engaging religious practices or activities somehow defined the needs and longings of the millennial youth. Dean (2004) defined these longings as passions. These passions are elaborated according to their longing for fidelity, longing for transcendence and longing for communion. Even the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines – Episcopal Commission on Youth (2004) cited that to be a good youth, one must establish a relationship with Christ, achieve personal growth and encourage community involvement. Further, Strommen (2000), an American pastor and youth specialist affirms that youth must be committed by trusting in a personal Christ, understanding the grace and living in grace, communing with God regularly, demonstrating moral responsibility and engaging in mission and service. These studies affirm the purpose of the engaging religious practices or

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines February 16, 2017



activities. Affirmed moreover, Strommen (2000) stated that the powerful influence in the faith development of millennial youth is family, congregation, community and culture. The results apparently revealed that family and friends matter most in practicing religious activities.

The meaning-making in engaging religious activities are varied depending on their contexts. It is something personal to the millennial youth. Cornelio (2016) termed these millennials as Creative Catholics. The researcher also agreed that spiritual identities of the millennial young people in De La Salle University include a personal and experiential relationship with God. It is also transcendental to the daily lives by expressing it through action. It is also founded and strengthened by a relationship with peers, friends, and family. Similar results revealed with Estanislao (2014) that millennials in DLSU actively participate in faith activities expressing through volunteering and doing charitable works.

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Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress
De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines February 16, 2017



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