

REMARKS FOR NET MINISTRIES BENEFIT AND BANQUET

Tuesday, April 27, 2010

BY THE MOST REVEREND JOHN C. NIENSTEDT

Good evening. I warmly thank all of you gathered here for your generous support of National Evangelization Teams, also known as NET ministries. It is a privilege to be present here with such committed Catholics as yourselves.

This evening we honor the work and dedication of an organization that is specifically oriented to send teams of capable men and women to evangelize young people throughout the United States. NET challenges its team members, as well as the youth to whom they serve, to live fully their faith by becoming disciples of Christ.

This challenge directly correlates with the Great Commission our Lord gave to his disciples, before He ascended into heaven,

“All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18b-20)

Two thousand years have passed since that instruction; and it is as relevant today as it was then. Indeed, it seems that organizations such as NET are needed now more than ever to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Although the NET teams are not necessarily baptizing those whom they encounter, they are serious about “making disciples of all nations.” While the spread of modern globalization is seen by many as a positive step in the right direction, it also presents to the Catholic Church a challenge for an increased need for authentic religious and moral catechesis.

Yet, even as we look forward with hope to a new generation of such dedicated disciples, oftentimes we are met with discouraging results. How do we find our young people today? What do they believe? What are their values? In what ways are they influencing society? Or in what ways is society influencing them? This evening, I want to paint a picture for you of the phenomena that is termed, “The Millennial Generation”. These are men and women from the ages of 18-29, who are making the passage into adulthood at the start of a new millennium. They number roughly 50 million Americans, or about one sixth of the population. Now, I am aware that this age group is slightly older than those with whom our NET teams work, but I believe many of the same influences are at play in both groups.

Recently, there have been two studies that have evaluated the characteristics and ideologies of the Millennial generation, as compared to their generational predecessors, such as Generation X, the Baby Boomers, and the Greatest, or Silent, generation.

The first study was conducted in 2009 by the Knights of Columbus in partnership with the Marist Institute for Public Opinion. Looking to understand the spirituality of the Millennials as compared to older generations, this study examined the moral values, worldviews, religious experiences, and social issues that were important to those questioned. The Marist study also differentiated between Catholic and non Catholic Millennials.

The second study was conducted by the Pew Research Center in January of this year. Covering everything from political and social values to lifestyles and life priorities, from digital technology and social media habits to economic and educational aspirations, the comprehensive Pew study substantiates many of the findings of the Marist study.

Beyond the well-known fact that this generation strongly supported our current president, the Millennial generation characterizes themselves as confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat, and open to change. In many ways, this is an accurate description, but in my opinion, that is not totally positive. In their “audacity to hope,” Millennials give us pause to consider what they consider as “change,” “hope,” and “morality.”

- On the question of moral relativism, 82% of Catholic Millennials replied that they did not believe in objective truth.
- Despite the fact that 85% of Catholic Millennials responded that they believe in God, only 25% go to Mass at least once a month.
- 61% of Catholic Millennials say that it is ok for someone of their religion to also practice another religion.
- With regard to moral choices, Millennials overwhelmingly disapprove of unethical business practices, but are divided on questions of abortion, same-sex marriage, divorce, and non-marital sex.
- While two in three believe medical testing on animals is morally wrong, one in three believe that abortion is morally acceptable or not a moral issue.
- Only 37% of Catholic Millennials believe that same sex “marriage” is morally wrong.
- 65% believe that divorce is morally acceptable and should not be considered a moral issue.
- Only one in five (20%) of Catholic Millennials believe that sex between an unmarried man and woman is morally wrong.
- Despite the obvious disconnect between religion and morals at odds with Church teaching, two thirds of Catholic Millennials are either very or somewhat interested in learning more about their faith.

In my estimation, the Millennial generation offers to the Church both a promise and a challenge. Certainly, the challenge is addressing the erroneous opinions and beliefs that a majority of this age group holds. In my opinion, this group has suffered from two generations of uncatechized Catholic parents and grandparents. The Latin adage “Nemo dat quod non habet” applies: you cannot pass the faith along to others, if you do not have a firm grasp of it yourself. In addition, challenges arise in methods of communication; in this digital age, we must confront the realities of cell phone texting, social networking sites, and other rapidly developing technologies.

But, there is a promise, here too. Both studies showed that Millennials place the importance of parenthood and marriage far above career and financial success. And as I mentioned, a majority of them are eager to learn more about their faith. In response to this statistic, Supreme Knight Carl Anderson remarked,

“There is much good news for the Church in this survey. The Church has a great opportunity to evangelize, and has much to build on with the next generation of Catholics, but it must act and teach in a way that makes clear the reasons for Church teaching as part of what our pope has called our 'yes' to Jesus Christ.”

My dear friends, this is not necessarily a message of despair, there is a message of hope here. The young men and women of the Millennial generation, as well as those growing up in their wake, are in search of the truth. To fulfill this hope, we must help lead these young people to the truth. By understanding their brokenness, we reach out to them. We invite them into the loving embrace of the Christian family, introducing them to God as our Father. Through the holy witness of Catholic families, we build upon the strong foundations of our faith, and make the teachings of the Church clear to young people. This is the challenge, for they are our promise.

For twenty-nine years now, NET ministries has been meeting challenges and fulfilling promises. By responding to the call for a “New Evangelization”, this organization has been challenging young men and women to grow and mature in their faith. Through the Christian witness to a living faith, NET teams strive to make a difference through parish retreats and other youth events across the country.

To illustrate just how this difference is being made, I would like to share with you a couple of actual quotes from teenagers who have benefited from a NET retreat:

“My NET experience was moving. I was finally able to understand just how much God loves us.” And also, “I felt like someone was actually there for me, someone I could talk to, someone who was able to give me advice when I needed it most. This is one of the best experiences I have ever had with God.”

Such sentiments display a sense of a deepening faith, a realization of what it means to be a Christian. This is the work of God made manifest through the young people who decide to become NET missionaries.

On December 7, 1990, the late, beloved Pope John Paul II promulgated his encyclical, Redemptoris Missio. In that document, the pontiff observed that missionary activity by the

Church appeared to be on the decline. He states clearly that this was not what the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council had envisioned. He went on to claim that the importance of such activity is meant 1) to renew the Church; 2) to revitalize faith and Christian identity and; 3) to offer fresh enthusiasm and new incentive for the apostolate. He sums this all up by saying that, “Faith is strengthened when it is given to others.”

Toward the end of that same encyclical, the Holy Father also points out that all missionary activity demands a special kind of spirituality, one that is characterized both by an intimate communion with Jesus Christ and a zealous, apostolic charity. In imitation of Jesus, the missionary renounces attachment to other relationships or priorities in order to become a brother or sister for the one to whom he or she is sent. And inspired by Christ’s love, the missionary becomes the “universal brother or sister” in an openness to and interest in those to whom he or she is sent.

I have seen both of the qualities that the Holy Father mentions in celebrating the Lifeline Masses here at the NET Center, as well as through my participation in NET’s governance structure, which I am privileged to chair. I find that NET is committed to its mission to challenge young Catholics to love Christ and embrace the life of the Church. In very real ways, it fulfills this mission by:

- Proclaiming the Gospel of Christ through a personal witness of faith
- Inviting young people to live for Christ
- Forming young people in Christian character through the study and practice of their faith, and,
- Equipping youth workers and young adults with the ministry skills needed for evangelization.

I am impressed with the enthusiasm and dedication of our NET disciples. I am proud to have their presence in this Archdiocese.

As we look forward to the challenges and promises that the younger generations hold, I encourage all us to remember these words of the Venerable Servant of God Pope John Paul II: “Duc in Altum! Go out into the deep!” (Novo Millennio Inuente)

Ladies and gentlemen, in this increasingly secular culture, we must go deeper; we must be vigilant in our efforts to keep our sons and daughters, our nieces and nephews, and our grandchildren close to the Church’s embrace. This is a generation that is searching for truth, so let us put out into the deep water and, to utilize a pun, lower our NETs. (Luke 5:4) It is my hope and prayer that evangelizing initiatives such as NET ministries will continue to flourish in their mission to spread the Gospel, by drawing young adults ever more closely into the heart of the Church.

Thank you!