

St. John Paul II envisioned a big church. So why are millennials feeling excluded?

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I have a postcard of the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace of Yamoussoukro taped up next to my office computer. Picture a near-replica of St. Peter's Basilica plunked onto a tropical plain in Côte d'Ivoire. *Guinness World Records* registers it as the largest church in the world, overtaking the original in the Vatican by almost 9,000 square meters. I have never been there, but the postcard reminds me of an observation my favorite philosophy professor regularly made to his students: "It's a *big* church."

In those lectures, he was usually reminding us that the church was big enough for both Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus; for St. Francis of Assisi and St. Louis, king of France; for Opus Dei and Voice of the Faithful. It was an injunction to put our intellectual differences or preferences of piety aside and remember that we have one faith, one Lord and one baptism.

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It was a message that John Paul II had a gift for communicating, especially to my millennial generation. Most of my earliest memories of television feature the pope descending from an airplane and kneeling to kiss the soil of places like Auckland, New Zealand; Kigali, Rwanda; or New Delhi, India. His pilgrimages to every corner

of the world showed me that the church is as big as our globe: We may speak a multitude of languages, live under different forms of government and be born of every race and ethnicity under the sun, but we are one body in Christ.

John Paul's zealous canonization of scores of lay people as well as religious illustrated again that it is a big church, big enough for every vocation and walk of life. More than anything, his way of speaking directly to young people, urgently inviting and encouraging my generation to put our gifts to the service of God in the world, taught me that it is a big church, and the church needs us in it—needs our energy, our talents, our questions.

I was largely unaware of the contentious theological and political issues that often divide public opinion about a pope. I was not reading encyclicals or following internecine ecclesiastical debates. Ideas matter, but they were not the source of the belonging I felt. What was convincing to me was this shepherd's evident love and joy, especially in the presence of children my age.

John Paul II died in the spring of my senior year of high school. At the time I was feeling overwhelmed by doubts about my faith, and the sexual abuse scandal had taught me to distrust church leaders. I was battling serious depression, and I was deeply angry at God.

I watched the papal funeral in St. Peter's Square, weeping despite myself.

Nevertheless, I crawled out of bed at 3 o'clock in the morning to sit alone, huddled in front of the TV in my family's dark and silent house, volume turned down low, watching the papal funeral in St. Peter's Square and weeping despite myself. It was a big church, packed to the gills with all the world's dignitaries that day. In the center, the book of the Gospels rested on top of his casket, and when its pages fluttered in the wind and its cover blew closed, it looked so lonely and so final.

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By all reports, the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace of Yamoussoukro is fairly empty most Sundays, since less than half of the country is Christian. Empty, too, are the more modestly sized parishes I attend in Louisville, Ky., the seat of the first Catholic diocese west of the Appalachian Mountains. Today, the throngs of young people who attended World Youth Days in Denver, Manila and Toronto are largely missing from the pews.

Commentators put forth myriad reasons for the religious disengagement of millennials. I suspect that it is simpler than any of their generational theories: The message that we heard proclaimed by the church's chief evangelist in our childhoods has been drowned out by other voices in our lives contradicting that message. Too many of us have been told from the pulpit or in a classroom or by a lay minister that we are too gay or too female or too mentally ill or too divorced or too disabled or too brown or too poor or too childless or too sinful to serve the church.

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Gay men apply to seminary and are denied entry based solely on their orientation. Developmentally disabled children are excluded from the sacrament of confirmation, their parents told that the kids would not understand what they receive. A theology graduate student diagnosed with P.T.S.D. is informed that her mental illness had undermined her relationship with God and she should withdraw from the program. The altar of nearly every church I have seen is inaccessible to people assisted by wheelchairs or walkers, preventing them from lectoring, cantoring or administering the Eucharist. Some dioceses have closed all their schools in impoverished areas putting a Catholic education out of reach for poor families.

Today's young adults see the same hypocrisy when they look at the church's history. Until the founding of St. Augustine's Seminary in Mississippi in 1920, black men were barred from U.S. seminaries and instead had to seek ordination abroad. In the

same era, African-American women were largely excluded from joining communities of religious sisters.

A person's sense of belonging can suffer death by a thousand pinpricks. A girl sees a column of boys assisting the priest at Mass, the smallest acolyte unable to reach the altar. Being too short to perform the tasks of an acolyte apparently is not a problem but being a girl is. A priest tells his congregation that no one who is divorced—even those divorced who are not remarried—may serve as a liturgical minister. Retreat talks on vocational discernment emphasize commitment to either marriage or religious life. They leave millennials who have not taken either path feeling excluded from God's work. Couples experiencing infertility hear again and again that the goodness of marriage is illustrated primarily in terms of openness to children. If they have no kids, how good can their marriage be?

There are countless other examples of Catholics who have heard the message that their gifts are unwanted. It is a big empty church, but if you are going to come wearing stained blue jeans or standing with your unmarried partner or carrying a screaming infant or struggling with a disability or in the throes of your own loud weeping, maybe you should sit in the back pew.

A person's sense of belonging can suffer by a thousand pinpricks.

Pope Francis has his own evangelical gift for reminding us that it is a big church, big enough for all of us who have been told such things. His humility and his candor are compelling in the same way as John Paul II's warmth and zeal. But the church is much bigger than the pope, and his message needs to be echoed by words of welcome in our parishes, schools and dioceses. The people who have the greatest power to wound us or encourage us are the people closest to us.

More destructive than the newspaper articles detailing the clerical sexual abuse scandals I grew up reading have been the crushing personal experiences of those close to me at the hands of representatives of the church. More powerful than the joyful witness of John Paul II in my life has been the profound witness of my mentors

and friends, fellow pilgrims who persist in the church despite being told some of the same discouraging messages I myself have been told. Unfortunately, negative messages are insidious; they become an ear-worm and can deafen people to words of welcome and encouragement.

My own pilgrimage has taken me to places I never expected to set foot and shown me the vastness and diversity of the church. I've walked four miles up a dirt road to hear the Divine Liturgy of the Byzantine Rite celebrated in a little wooden church perched on a Ukrainian hillside. I've been prayed over by people who were sleeping on Dublin's streets. I've been welcomed to eat, pray and celebrate with L'Arche communities. I've had candles lit for me at a shrine an ocean away by friends who knew I was struggling. In the name of Christ, a pair of friends gave me a home and a sense of safety when I lost my own. On the occasions I've been confounded by doubt, others have told me they have faith on my behalf.

I have found the Eucharist and been offered belonging on every journey I've made. It keeps me coming to the church, even when the church's pews are empty, even when I've been made to feel that I belong in the last row.

It is a big church, and I have seen enough of it to know there is still room in it for me and for anyone who has felt like they were turned away at the door.

This article also appeared in print, under the headline "It's a big church. Why don't millennials feel like they belong.," in the October 1, 2018 issue.

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