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The Church is young

Bishop John T. Folda

It has sometimes been said that young people are the “future of the Church,” and certainly there is some truth to that statement. But, young people are also at the heart of the Church’s present moment as well. In his inaugural homily in 2005, the newly elected Pope Benedict XVI observed that “the Church is alive. And, the Church is young.” There is a perennial youthfulness about the Church which reflects the power of God’s grace to always bring forth new life. So, the Church is ever young in the gift of God’s grace, but she is also young in her members. We sometimes hear about the aging of the Church, but recently I have also seen the youthful face of the Church.

During the first week of January, I had the opportunity to be in Nashville for the annual SEEK Conference, a national gathering of Catholic college students from all over the country, sponsored by FOCUS, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students. From our own NDSU and UND campuses, 200 college students travelled by bus to participate in the conference, and they joined nearly 10,000 others for five days to pray, to celebrate and to learn more about our Catholic faith.

Strong desire in youth

It was an incredible experience to witness the reverence, prayerfulness, and spiritual fire of the participants, and the grace of the Holy Spirit was palpable during the course of those days. The many priests and bishops who attended were in high demand and kept very busy hearing confessions for hours on end, indicating that these young people were serious about their desire for conversion and personal holiness. The liturgies were beautiful and inspiring, as the huge crowd joined together to worship our Lord and sing his praises with enthusiasm. Eucharistic adoration was powerfully silent, as throngs of college students prayed quietly before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. And, the spirit of exuberance and joy was infectious, as these college students rejoiced in our Catholic faith. They were simply happy to be together and to celebrate with one another the marvelous gift of faith that we have received.

A key element of the conference was the importance of giving personal witness to Christ, and the young participants were clearly eager to do so. FOCUS missionaries on more than one hundred college campuses work person to person with students to help them deepen their own faith and share that faith with others. The number of college age students who give up the practice of the faith each year is sobering, but events like the SEEK Conference remind me that huge numbers of young people are seeking God in their lives and coming alive in their faith. They are already taking a lead role in reaching out to their peers, and they are at the forefront of the evangelization of our nation and our culture, starting on college campuses but also radiating outwards to parishes, schools and workplaces. They are like a leaven that will enliven the Church from within and renew our sense of mission. It was a real lift to be with these young people at the SEEK Conference, and it gave me great hope not just for the future of the Church, but for the present as well.

Actions of youth give hope

I also just returned from the annual March for Life in Washington D.C., where more than 600 pilgrims from North Dakota travelled to give witness to the sanctity of life in the nation's capital. The March was especially significant for our diocese this year, because the students of Shanley High School were chosen to lead and carry the official banner at the head of hundreds of thousands of marchers from across the country. Julia Johnson, a senior at Shanley, was chosen to speak at the pre-March rally, where Catholic News Service says she gave what may have been "the most inspirational address of the day." As a member of the pro-life generation, she said, "it is up to the youth of America to end the scourge of abortion." The young people from Shanley and from other schools across North Dakota who attended the March are indeed part of the "pro-life generation," and they show once again the youthful face of the Church. I had the privilege of celebrating Mass for them and all other pilgrims from North Dakota on the morning of the March, and was deeply touched by their prayerful and energetic participation, even after a grueling 24 hour bus trip. Later at the March they cheered and chanted with gusto for the protection of our unborn brothers and sisters.

Once again, these young people give me great hope. They are the young face of the pro-life movement, and they are the young face of the Church. And, despite the seriousness of the cause that drew them to Washington, they were filled with exuberance and joy as they marched up Constitution Avenue. They will make a difference in the Church and in the world, and in the words of Pope Francis, God is already preparing them "to build a more beautiful Church and a better world."

The Church needs the energy and joy of its young people, and I am encouraged to see the kind of enthusiasm that I witnessed in the last few weeks. Yes, there are challenges, and many young people are skeptical about religion and faith in general. We shouldn't be put off by their questions, but should do all we can to give them clear and honest answers. Our youth deserve the same gift of faith that we have received, and we must be sure to hand it on to them in its fullness and its beauty. But, we must also help them to see that they have a part to play in the life of the Church, not just tomorrow but today, and we should not overlook the gifts of their energy and zeal.

Pope Francis spoke with great affection to young people last year at World Youth Day in Rio. He also made it clear that they are at the heart of the Church's life and mission. He said, "You too, dear young people, can be joyful witnesses of Christ's love, courageous witnesses of his Gospel, carrying to this world a ray of his light.... Dear young friends, Jesus Christ is counting on you! The Church is counting on you! The Pope is counting on you! Go and make disciples of all nations!" Pope Benedict and Pope Francis are right. By the grace of God, the Church is alive, and the Church is young.