

THE CHURCH COMMUNITY: A DISTINCT CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL CONTEXT

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Abstract: This paper discusses the role of a Maronite Church in contributing to a group of young Maronite adults' spirituality. The research focused on cultural, social and spiritual aspects that the Maronite Church provided for the young adults. It examines implications and recommendations as to how the Maronite Church can best serve the needs of these young adults and nurture an authentic Maronite spirituality in an Australian context.

Introduction

The Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Church, situated in Western Sydney, attracts approximately 1000 Maronite young adults every week to its Sunday 7 pm English Divine Liturgy. As a case study this phenomenon was investigated through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in order to understand what drew these adults to attend in such large numbers.

Cultural aspects of a Maronite Church in Australia

The appeal of the Maronite Church for many second-generation members lay in its capacity to provide cultural identity and group empowerment. One way was through use of the English language in contrast with the other Sunday Liturgies (the exception being the 9:30am), which are either Arabic or a mixture of Arabic and English. Considering that the majority of young adults who attended the Liturgy were born in Australia, English was the preferred language.

First of all 7 pm Mass is in English and for like me I know I can pray better when I actually understand what is going on... you can participate more and you can pray more.

Participation in the Eucharistic celebration for these young adults involved fully understanding, participating and responding. The Eucharistic assembly was viewed as one in

which participants developed spiritually through listening to Scripture, engagement in prayer and enacting in ritual and symbol their daily life of communion and celebration of faith.

Religious and cultural traditions are tightly interwoven in Lebanese Maronite Catholic identity and both are treasured by the individual.

My parents have always instilled it to us that we are Maronites. We are Maronite before anything else. I come here and... I feel like I've come full circle in my faith. I used to just come to Mass because it was something you did but now I actually come to Mass because I want to.... When you go out into society and you're with people who aren't Lebanese and you feel like... it makes you question yourself.

The sense of being familiar with the Divine Liturgy, being with people of the parish who were of the same ethnic background and enjoying the variety of events that were held, contributed to a sense of cultural belonging to a parish.

Our Church is more, you just notice like inside everyone's more of a family. But when you go to a normal Catholic Church where there is a multicultural crowd, you don't see the actual crowd connected together that you would at our church.

As a mono-cultural Church with congregants of Lebanese Maronite background, this community was tight knit and had little connection with other nationalities. However this Lebanese-centred culture was valued by the participants with no expressed concern to be part of other cultural groups and faiths in the arena of parish life.

In addition to acknowledging the importance of the English language and Lebanese culture, the Maronites chose to attend the Maronite Catholic Liturgy because the priest offered 'culturally relevant' homilies.

Whereas at the same time the target is obviously for the youth so the homilies are directed very much to the issues that are part of today and growing up. And the priests that they use to sort of say the Mass, they connect so well with the youth. You feel a lot more involved.

The young adults had their own concerns, including being of Middle Eastern background in a society that was suspicious of the foreign. There also existed the struggle of relating to Lebanese parents and the temptations that emerged in a secular and western society. The Sunday homilies were used by participants as spiritual guidance. As one participant commented concerning the homilies, 'talking about certain things in the way our culture operates and you know things we can relate to as Lebanese.'

In contrast, participants indicated that their experience of the homily at the Roman Catholic Masses, reflected a Church that was dull and out of touch.

Where it's different though is that I tend to tune out in the Roman Catholic Masses because like I said before it's a literal interpretation of the Bible, so it felt like he was talking down at you and not to you. There isn't really a strong sense of community... the priests are very old and they don't connect with the youth. They don't know what youth means.

The criticism geared towards Roman Catholic services were based on the participants' perceptions of elderly priests targeting an older audience and homilies that were considered to lack a cultural connection to their experienced lifestyle. Yet these statements need to be considered as generalized, particularly when attendances at Roman Catholic Churches are infrequent by these participants. Contrary to their notions, the Mason et al study revealed 83% of the Generation Y young adults who attended their Church regularly or occasionally found it 'warm and welcoming.'¹

Social factors of a Maronite Church in Australia

Other than cultural factors that contribute to attendance of the young adults to their local Maronite Church, there was also the experience of social factors. One such reason for attendance was the young age of the congregants (15-35 year olds). It meant opportunities to catch up with friends they may not usually see, be part of the life of other young people, share the same understanding and faith, and socialize afterwards.

Apart from all the religious stuff, I love going there and yeah my friends go. Usually it's sort of like a meeting point and then you go, might do something afterwards. It's just nice. It's a different feeling. They're all young, and you know people who are the same age as you, have no problem coming and expressing their faith in that way.

In a multicultural society where there are so many 'other' people and 'strange' ways of living and believing, coming to a place where young adults of the same belief gather, appeared to provide a source of strength and comfort, consolidating one's values, lifestyle and beliefs. The participants also attended the Divine Liturgy for practical reasons. Sunday at 7 pm provided appropriate opportunity to attend because few commitments were on then. It

¹ Mason, Singleton and Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y. Young People's spirituality in a changing Australia*, (Victoria: John Garret Publishing, 2007), 102.

also provided time to socialize afterwards. The Church therefore chose to cater not only for the cultural needs, but was willing to be viewed as a point of social contact.

The participants' responses also reflected a feeling of being inferior among others but accepted by people of one's kind.

Because I'm Lebanese and this is a Lebanese Church and I feel more homely.

Engebretson noted that in individualistic societies such as Australia, often members do not share similar values, beliefs or purpose. A sense of responsibility for others beyond one's immediate family and friendship group was optional. Yet in socially integrated societies, people are socialized into cohesive groups of kinship and friendship and the young person is taught a sense of belonging, rights and responsibilities. Where individualistic cultures emphasize the role and rights of the individual, collectivist cultures emphasize the family and community.² For young Maronite adults raised in a Lebanese family that is collectivist in understanding, while also experiencing an Australian individualistic society, there is a need to place emphasis on the Church as a community. This leads Churches to perform functions which go beyond their spiritual functions. One participant put it succinctly when she expressed her commitment to Our Lady of Lebanon Parish:

When you make a particular Church your parish, it's a lot different to attending a Church just for the sake of attending Mass. A parish involves something completely different. It takes it to a new level and that's why I think I've got more of a connection, whether it be in our Lady of Lebanon Church particularly or in other Maronite Churches because there seems to be that same focus, that same kind of activities going on. You celebrate feast days, you celebrate parish barbeques. There's that connection that in a Roman Catholic Church, I mean they probably have fetes and things that people get attracted to but it's not something that I've been brought up on.

Yet though participants felt a sense of warmth, belonging and connection, a Maronite community where difference is not confronted or valued is contrary to what is envisioned in a Christian community.

Spiritual experiences in a Maronite Church in Australia

The Church is concerned with Eucharistic spirituality, where one shares in communion, the mystery of Christ and the Trinity, emphasising community rather than individuality. Along

² Kath Engebretson, *Connecting. Teenage Boys, Spirituality and Religious Education*, (Strathfield NSW, St Pauls, 2007), 112-113.

with the sacraments, the role of Scripture, Tradition and prayer are also essential to a Christian spirituality, with the saints and the Virgin Mary playing important roles. According to comments that emerged from the interviews conducted, the use of Aramaic, the language of Jesus, was also essential.

And that part of the Mass is in Aramaic that sought of keeps it real, that it's Maronite.

The literary form of Aramaic is preserved by the three Catholic Churches of the West Syriac-Antiochene Rite – the Syriac Catholic Church, the Maronite Catholic Church and the Syro-Malankar Catholic Church of India. In preserving West Syriac in the liturgy, the Maronite Church preserves the language of Jesus.³

Aramaic and Maronite hymns highlighted a sense of the sacred, which was treasured by participants in opposition to the postmodern western culture with its tendency towards secularism and individualism. Gaillardetz wrote about contemporary life:

When technology devalues human engagement, commodifies human goods, eliminates all forms of human friction, and circumvents all experiences of human limitations, our capacity to enter into this liturgy of the world is diminished. This diminishment heightens our need for the liturgy of the Church as the 'sacred place' properly understood, in which we discover the 'holy ground' that is our daily life.⁴

Ritualistic actions it appeared were highly favoured by participants, who also noted the difference in the time spent at Liturgy, claiming the Roman Mass was too rushed. Emphasis on Maronite tradition, the grandeur of the Eucharistic celebration and informative homilies, were comments expressed throughout the interviews, along with living out in their daily lives what was heard and experienced.

I think it's like everything about it, the homily, the atmosphere, the fact that I'm Maronite and I'm attending a Maronite Mass... challenges me than any other Mass.. there's a lot more effort put into it. It's grand. A feeling you've attended something bigger than you.

Participation in the life of the Church becomes a means of opening one's eyes to the divine presence in the world. What appeared to be absent however in this case study was the

³ Anthony Salim, *Captivated by your teachings. A resource book for adult Maronite Catholics*, (Arizona: E. T. Nedder Publishing, 2002), 100.

⁴ Richard Gaillardetz, *Transforming our days. Spirituality, community, and liturgy in a technological culture*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 113.

invitation to establish a community gathered around the Lord's table, that included other nationalities and denominational groups.

Catering for the spiritual needs of the young Maronite adults

The Maronite Church also provided spiritual support to its young congregants through a number of events. A popular event was the weekly Faith and Bible discussion evenings. Reasons why young adults chose to participate, included learning more about their faith and the Bible, a time to discuss real life issues that affected young adults that could not be discussed elsewhere, and to access spiritual guidance for their everyday living. Discussions were carried out in a warm atmosphere with opportunity to question, meet others and share faith experiences.

The rosary has been an ongoing weekly spiritual event in the Church. For participants it offered a relaxing 'time out' to refocus on God in the middle of the week. Participants referred to the rosary as 'very spiritual,' as a way to 'deepen my faith,' and to 'become closer to God.'

There were participants who volunteered their time to organize events as part of the Maronite Youth Organization (MYO). The MYO is responsible for annual retreats, harbour cruises, dinner dances, the rosary, spiritual days, barbeques, picnics and wine tasting tours. Reasons why the young adults participated included giving something back to the Church community, to being part of a team that organises youth events.

According to a study of Generation Y, Churches provide opportunities for young people to practice their skills by taking on roles within the faith community and most young people appear willing to assist those closest to them, as well as expressing concern about social issues. Likewise the MYO offered service to the local Maronite community but it too may well extend its role to serve the wider community, particularly as it is a very close knit community of particular ethnic background in a multicultural nation.

What emerged as of most spiritual significance were the annual Lenten weekend retreats. Participants experienced what was termed 'spiritual renewal,' with many returning year after year. Engebretson who offered implications for ministry with 16 to 25 year old people in an Australian context, stated 'A central task for those who work with young people is the creation of spiritual experiences that will help young people to articulate their questions, to share them in a supportive environment, and, with an eye on the wisdom of

religious traditions, to pursue them together with experienced leaders and with their peers.’⁵

One participant of this study said:

Retreats and Spiritual Days, that’s where I get most out of. I know with retreats it’s a life changing experience... you gain a lot more from those than just coming to Church for one hour each week.... the way it’s presented to us and the way we interact in groups and in the larger groups. So you get to meet other people and people who have the same issues as you. You know you’re not alone. It goes from being something spiritually enriching to also socially you form friendships out of it.

The trend towards individual spirituality that is disconnected from religious tradition was not reflected among the young Maronite adult cohort in this study. Participants who did not engage in parish spiritual events, still emphasized in their spirituality the communal aspect and value of attending the Eucharistic liturgy.

Aside from participating at the Eucharistic celebration and other events, the participants were asked to comment on the contribution of the Church to their spiritual lives. Although most respondents were positive about the Church’s efforts in providing for their spiritual needs, they were less positive about their own initiative. For participants it seemed that furthering their spirituality ultimately came down to their own choice of lifestyle and habits. Despite being critical of their personal attempts, the participants desired to further their spirituality, choosing the Church as a place that offered spiritual nourishment.

Conclusion

Different events offered by the Church attracted and engaged the young Maronite adults and afforded different ways of belonging and being community. Concerning worship at different levels Hughes wrote:

Worship that expresses what we feel must be in the language of the heart. Among younger people in our community, that means that worship will be different from one group to another, both in language and in style, in symbol and focus. As God came into our culture to express God’s self, so we need to express our worship in the language and symbols of our culture... Most importantly, however, they relate to a world in which young people are trying, each in their individualistic way, to put their lives together – their relationships, study, work; the world of fun and excitement, of chill-out times, and sometimes of confusion and hurt.⁶

⁵ Kathleen Engebretson, ‘Young People, culture, and spirituality: some implications for ministry,’ *Religious Education* 98, no. 1 (Winter 2003):19.

⁶ Hughes, *Putting Life Together. Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research*, 196.

The Maronite Catholic Church case study was seen as a place that captured the participants' tastes and interests, styles and passions.

For the Maronite immigrant community and its children, the religious institution has played an important role in catering for the young adults' social and cultural needs, with the ritual power of the worship service emerging as an essential source of spirituality. The Maronite Church appears to have retained a strong sense of the Lebanese culture and tradition, ethnicity and ritualism, community and socializing and these factors have attracted the young Maronite adults to appreciate and immerse themselves in the parish life. Yet there were less positive aspects of the close-knit and closed-in Maronite community.

Any Church will only reflect the Church of God when it strives towards universality and enculturation. However a problematic issue that emerged from the discussions in this study were the participants negative views of the Roman Catholic service. This became particularly evident when participants favoured the 'Lebanese culture' of the parish over and above other religious denominations. Their experience of the lack of connection in Roman Catholic parishes also raised the question of whether this was due to their tight-knit experience of the Lebanese community or if in actual fact the Roman Catholic parishes they experienced were too Anglo-Saxon in expression. Pearson noted:

we come together, in and from our different cultures, through the cross of Christ. In order to engage with one another at any level of depth we will need to cross over from our space into the space of the other... in this mutual crossing we will experiment with the Christian life, for in order to follow we will take up our crosses and sometimes deny ourselves. Maybe we will let go some things which have been important to our cultural identity in the past for the sake of something which is more true to who we are now and where we are.⁷

Ethnic experience heightens consciousness of one's relationship to a particular cultural and religious understanding of values. Yet there is more to being Church than simply identifying with a particular community. It entails communion with the universal Church. The call to enculturation entails the call to ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue.

Participants who attended the Church in an effort to develop their spirituality, experienced nourishment through retreats, MYO, rosary and Bible discussions. Their desire for ethnic community and social engagement also served as motivation for participating in the Church. According to Rolheiser, Jesus prescribed four things as an essential praxis for a

⁷ Clive Pearson, 'Cross-Cultural Theologies in Australia: In search of conversation partners' in *Faith in a Hyphen: Cross-Cultural Theologies Down Under*, edited by Clive Pearson (UTC Publishers: Openbook Pub., 2004), 197.

healthy spiritual life. These included private prayer and morality, a sense of social justice, mellowness of heart and spirit, and community as a constitutive element of true worship.⁸ If these four elements are considered, based on the participants' responses, one may conclude that there is a healthy spiritual life emerging from Our Lady of Lebanon parish. Yet the challenge is there to maintain the right relationship between their community and multicultural Australia, the local and the universal.

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⁸ Ronald Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality. Guidelines for a Christian Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), 31.