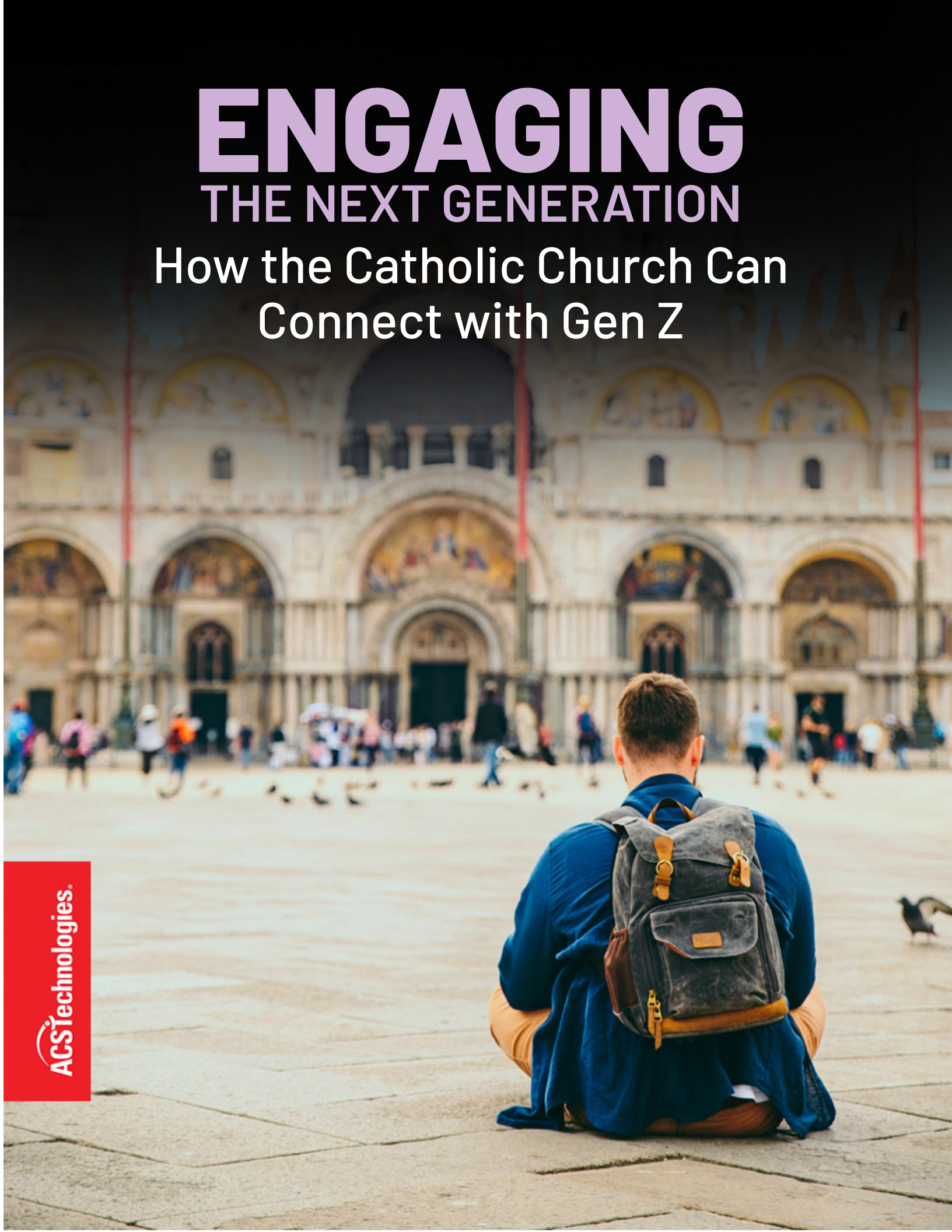


ENGAGING THE NEXT GENERATION

How the Catholic Church Can Connect with Gen Z

ACS Technologies.





May all those who are not yet enlightened by the radiant torch of Faith finally see it shining."
St. Thérèse of Lisieux

So many lines have been written about the state of the Catholic Church today—the declining Mass attendance, the lack of belief in the Real Presence in the Eucharist, fewer and fewer Catholic marriages, dropping numbers of children receiving the sacraments—we are well aware of the data. And what typically follows are questions about what can be done, which usually leads to the now burning question: how can the Catholic Church connect with Gen Z?

The generation of people born from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s grew up in a historical, technological, and cultural context that is wholly unlike previous generations. Gen Z members were primarily raised by Millennials and, in some cases, Gen X. It is these previous generations that were leaving the Church over the past few decades for various reasons: cultural shifts toward secularism, scandals in the church, disagreement with core Church teachings, and the feeling that the Church was simply irrelevant to their lives.

So, Gen Z was raised with little or no experience with "church" and no reason to seek it out. In his Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope St. John Paul II wrote, "The number of those who do not know Christ and do not belong to the Church is constantly on the increase. ... When we consider this immense portion of humanity which is loved by the Father and for whom he sent his Son, the urgency of the Church's mission is obvious."¹

So, it isn't about simply refilling the pews with people from a new generation—although it is important in the long-long view to pass the Faith to generations to come—but it is about the salvation of souls.

'The missionary,' wrote St. John Paul II, "is urged on by 'zeal for souls,' a zeal inspired by Christ's own charity, which takes the form of concern, tenderness, compassion, openness, availability and interest in people's problems."²

We pray for the grace to carry this zeal for souls into our collective work to reach and engage with Gen Z. The point is not simply to attract their attention but to invite them in, encourage and celebrate their uniqueness, listen to them, dialogue with them, and ultimately gain their trust—which may initially, of necessity, be outside the construct of "church." Then, when we have gained their trust, we can then introduce them to the person of Jesus Christ.

¹Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (3), December 7, 1990

²Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (89), December 7, 1990

Understanding Gen Z Values and Spirituality

There are several key characteristics of Gen Z, which are deeply rooted values and beliefs that determine much of what this generation thinks, does, and says. If these concepts are not addressed head-on, the Church doesn't stand much of a chance of penetrating their consciousness.

Understanding Gen Z's values is crucial for building relationships, fostering effective communication, and building trust. Considering their core values with empathy and respect, we can find ways to support and include them.

Gen Z may be largely "unchurched," but they are not devoid of a spiritual side. They search for meaning, purpose, and transcendence that goes beyond the physical and material aspects of life. For this generation, their spirituality is generally secular, outside organized religion. Considering their spirituality enables us to better appreciate their unique perspective and approach interactions with sensitivity, tolerance, and acceptance. Acceptance will be vital to earning their trust.

As we dig into what matters to our Gen Z population, we begin to see areas in which the Catholic church is in alignment and other areas that may seem to be in opposition. It is important to remember that this generation is not likely to seek out the church as a way to live out their values.



Include Everyone: Gen Z and Diversity and Inclusion

Gen Z places a very high value on diversity and inclusivity. They are fierce advocates for equal rights and opportunities regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or any other factor. Many in this generation are committed to creating a more inclusive and equitable society and actively seek out ways to help further the cause. If they sense an organization (or the Church) is not actively promoting diversity and inclusion, it is likely a non-starter.

But diversity and inclusion aren't just values to Gen Z. They play a role in their spirituality. While Gen Z may be less likely to adhere to a single religious tradition, they often appreciate and respect religious diversity. They are generally more open to interfaith dialogues and emphasize inclusivity, valuing the coexistence of different beliefs and practices.

Understanding Leads to Action

While this can be a thorny subject among Catholics, it is one that must be addressed in a charitable way—in a manner that maintains fraternity with the teachings of the Church and emphasizes the dignity of every human being. Pope Francis spoke to this after the killing of George Floyd, "we cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life."

As we know with Gen Zers, though, it will take more than just words, but actions. Here are some suggestions that could be employed in communities and parishes.

- **Cultural Integration:** Embrace and include different cultural expressions within the Church. This can include incorporating diverse music, art, and rituals that reflect the richness of the Catholic global community. Consider offering one or more Masses monthly that are culturally diverse. As with other initiatives, it will be important to promote this online to capture the attention of Gen Z. To increase awareness within the community, consider outdoor banners or signs to capture their attention; even if they don't attend, it could break down some preconceptions about the parish.



- **Educational Initiative:** Develop a series of educational talks that promote understanding and acceptance of different cultures, backgrounds, and identities and open them to the public. Speakers could be community leaders of any religious background or, alternately, select a speaker panel that includes a variety of religious traditions, ethnicities, and identities. To best invite Gen Z to these community meetings, promote them online, on social media, and through a variety of influencers.

Consider This

As you review all the actions and ideas in this guide, we encourage you to consider inviting your current Gen Z parishioners or Gen Z children of parishioners to participate in defining and executing the initiatives. Having them take leadership roles not only fosters authenticity but gives them a sense of ownership in the process.



Protect Everyone: Gen Z and Social Justice

Social justice is a core value of Gen Zers. They are strong and vocal advocates for causes like racial equality, gender equity, climate change, and human rights. Gen Z is deeply concerned about the environment and climate change. Many are dedicated to reducing their carbon footprint and supporting initiatives to address environmental issues. Gen Z is politically engaged and views voting and participation in the democratic process as important responsibilities. They are often informed about political issues and seek to influence social and political change. Activism and advocacy play a significant role in their lives. Being digital natives, they use social media and online platforms to raise awareness of these issues and connect with like-minded people.

In terms of their spirituality, this may manifest as a commitment to making the world a better place through activism and ethical living. Gen Z finds deep spiritual significance in their connection to the environment and nature, and they are passionate advocates for environmental conservation. This eco-spirituality aligns with their values and concerns about the planet's future.

Understanding Leads to Action

The Catholic church has always emphasized social justice as a core element of her teaching and mission. It is a fundamental principle within Catholic doctrine. Catholic social teaching provides a moral framework for addressing various social issues, including poverty, inequality, discrimination, and human rights. It calls on individuals and communities to work toward a more just and equitable society and to prioritize the well-being of the most vulnerable. These teachings continue to guide the Church's advocacy and social justice initiatives.

Catholic teaching on social justice aligns with the values and spirituality of Gen Z, but the Church largely has not done a good job of discussing it outside its own walls. In truth, it can be a divisive issue for Catholics. Some Catholics may emphasize specific social justice issues over others, political and ideological affiliations can lead to varying approaches to social justice issues, and varying perspectives on complex ethical dilemmas can lead to tension.

But, these divides do not mean that the Church's core social justice teachings are in question. And when we focus on what is established doctrine, we can come together in the interest of reaching the next generation. The USCCB outlines the seven themes of Catholic social teaching:

- Life and dignity of the human person
- Call to family, community, and participation
- The dignity of work and the rights of workers
- Option for the poor and vulnerable
- Rights and responsibilities
- Solidarity
- Care for God's creation

Many Catholic organizations are actively involved in serving those on the margins, taking care of the environment, and more. But what are some grassroots efforts that parishes can manage today? Here are a few ideas that could resonate with Gen Z.

- **Environmental Stewardship:** Parishes can lead by example in implementing eco-friendly practices and supporting environmental initiatives. Organize the parish to provide community cleanup. Participate in and support local recycling programs. Coordinate donation collection days at the parish. To attract the attention of Gen Z, these activities should be open to the public and well promoted. These provide an excellent opportunity for interaction with those outside the parish but inside the community. Make sure they are online, on social media, and advertised locally.
- **Community Engagement:** Provide and promote volunteer opportunities with the parish that address social justice concerns of Gen Z. Invite those outside the parish to give their time to the local food pantry, soup kitchen or as social advocates. They need not be Catholic to give up their time. This could break through to Gen Z as a way to get involved in a cause they care about without the perceived constraint of church hierarchy.

Consider This

Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si* and his Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* address key areas of concern for Gen Zers. Both documents present the urgent need for global cooperation to address environmental issues and climate change. Consider making printed versions of these available for free at community events that focus on social justice.



Care for Everyone: Gen Z and Mental Health and Well-Being

Mental health and well-being are extremely important to Gen Z. They value a healthy work-life balance and promote and encourage well-being in the workplace. They prioritize flexible work arrangements, mental health support, and a healthy balance between professional and personal life. Gen Zers are proactive in discussing mental health challenges and seeking support, promoting a culture of self-care and emotional wellness.

Gen Z members practice mindfulness, meditation, yoga, and other stress-reduction techniques to find inner peace and emotional balance in a fast-paced and often stressful world. They also engage in online communities dedicated to mental health, and they use these platforms to share experiences and ask for advice.

It's important to note that while Gen Z concentrates on mental health and well-being, they are not immune to mental health issues themselves. They tend to be highly pragmatic, place a priority on learning, higher education, and professional growth, and are often concerned about debt, budgeting, and their future. These internal pressures can affect their self-esteem and overall confidence.

Understanding Leads to Action

Because we believe in the dignity of all human life, it follows that Catholics place importance on a person's mental health and well-being. In October 2023, the USCCB Office of Domestic Justice and Human Development released an introductory statement on the National Catholic Health Campaign. The object of the campaign is to "help remove the sense of stigma or embarrassment for persons who suffer and to advocate a clear message to all: everyone who needs help should get help."

This mission is one that would be enthusiastically endorsed by our Gen Zers. But, like many of these initiatives undertaken by the bishops, they are largely unknown outside the Church. They are particularly invisible to Gen Z, who are not seeking answers from the Church at all. In a sense, the parish could have the advantage of offering services and activities that could capture the attention of Gen Z in a way that larger church initiatives can not.

- **Mental Health Education:** Offer public workshops, seminars, and resources that focus on mental health awareness, stress management, and emotional well-being. Invite well-known local mental health professionals to give talks that are open to the public. Specifically include topics that are of interest to Gen Z, such as anxiety, loneliness, and depression. Invitation and publicity should foster a sense of curiosity, openness, and acceptance to combat the stigma associated with seeking mental health resources. To reach Gen Zers, promote this offering online, in social media, and through influencers. Remember: Gen Z is probably not looking to the parish specifically for information, so reach out beyond the typical Catholic channels.



- **Meditation and Mindfulness:** There are many Catholic prayer traditions that are compatible with Gen Z's openness to unique practices (outlined more in the next section). Many non-Catholics have participated in the 19th Annotation, based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. Experiment with offering 30-minute meditations and use the Daily Examen as a basis. Consider hosting these events off parish property and make them open to the public. In your promotion, make it clear that this is open to everyone, regardless of any faith tradition.



See Me: Gen Z and Individualism and Self-Expression

Gen Z places a strong emphasis on individuality and self-expression. They value the freedom to be themselves and express their unique identities and beliefs. This can be seen in their embrace of diverse fashion, art, and culture. They are independent and often pursue side hustles, freelancing, and entrepreneurship so that they can create their own career path. Gen Z is highly accepting of diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, and cultural backgrounds. They seek to express themselves in an authentic way. Questions about personal identity, including gender identity and sexual orientation, can lead to self-discovery but also potentially to moments of self-doubt and insecurity.

Gen Z values personalized experiences in all aspects of life, including spirituality. They tend to craft their spiritual beliefs and practices to align with their unique experiences and values. Gen Z is characterized by a high degree of spiritual pluralism. Many individuals in this generation embrace a "cafeteria-style" approach to spirituality, drawing inspiration from a variety of sources, including traditional religious elements, different religious traditions, New Age practices, meditation, mindfulness, astrology, or other practices that resonate with them.

Understanding Leads to Action

There are certainly many aspects of Catholicism that would appeal to Gen Z in this area. The Church's love of art and culture can be found in nearly every aspect of church life—from small parishes to shrines to cathedrals and Basilicas; we are surrounded by beauty. Many books, lectures, and courses have been developed to help us understand the various ways art and music can enhance our experience of prayer and the liturgy. Even Bishop Robert Barron's acclaimed Catholicism series was created to reveal the beauty and wonder of the faith.

For self-expression, we need to look no further than the saints. There are no cookie-cutter saints! Each one is beautifully and authentically him- or herself. Consider St. John of Arc and St. Teresa of Calcutta. Or St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Francis of Assisi.

But as we have already covered, Gen Z is not looking to the Church to find ways to express their individuality. So we have to find ways to go to them.

- **Arts and Creative Expression:** Support and promote creative expression within the community. Encourage Gen Z to use their artistic talents in music, art, writing, and other media and receive local recognition. Examples might include mural painting on a church or community building, parish ministry logo development, or custom music that could be used for the parish website or for events. Scholarships could be awarded for poetry or essay writing. As with similar ideas, promotion of these opportunities would need to go beyond the Catholic channels and well into the community, with signage, online ads, etc.



- **Career Coaching:** Assist Gen Z in exploring their vocations and callings, whether in religious life, lay ministry, or other professions. Recruit the parish priest, deacon, or other staff to offer one-on-one counseling or mentorship. Advertise this offering locally to reach parents or grandparents, then online and on social media. This is an excellent opportunity for members of Gen Z to see that the parish cares about their future and build trust.



Show Me: Gen Z and Authenticity and Transparency

Gen Z values authenticity and transparency in individuals, institutions, and brands. They are skeptical of inauthenticity and demand transparency in marketing, communications, and social interactions. They are always scanning for dishonesty and can spot phonies right away. Gen Z also values face-to-face social connections and communities in their search for genuine relationships.

Many in Gen Z are skeptical of religious dogma and hierarchies. They prefer spirituality that encourages questioning, exploration, and self-discovery rather than strict adherence to a set of beliefs dictated by an institution.

The digitally-native Gen Zers go online to confirm their suspicions; the secrecy and scandals that have plagued the Church and other religious organizations have likely contributed to their distrust. Since they highly value inclusion and diversity, they may also see religious organizations as less aligned with these principles, particularly when they sense that dogma is prioritized over inclusion.

Understanding Leads to Action

Transparency is a hot topic in Catholic communication right now. Like any large institution, the Church strives to demonstrate authenticity and transparency in a variety of ways. While the Church has faced challenges and criticisms, it has taken several measures to promote these values. Improvements in financial transparency, reforms in safeguarding policies, public statements and apologies, and encyclicals and other official documents are just some of the ways the Church is working to become more transparent. We have a way to go. While there is ongoing discussion about the need for further reforms and accountability, it is important to recognize that these efforts are ongoing, and the Church continues to grapple with its historical challenges while working to engage with the modern world.

At the same time, it's important to prioritize transparency at the parish level. Openly sharing information about the parish's activities, finances, and decision-making processes demonstrates a commitment to openness and honesty, so important to building trust with Gen Zers. Additionally, parishes should be open about their goals and challenges and then invite Gen Z members to participate in addressing them in meaningful ways.

- **Active Listening:** Up to now, the ideas in this guide involved going out beyond the parish to find and engage Gen Z "in the wild." This idea brings it back inside the parish in order to understand how to go back out. Bring your active Gen Z members together for a listening

session or sessions. You may invite Gen Zers (or even late Millennials) who were active in the parish and have left. This may appeal to their need to be heard. Invite the group to share their perspective on any doubts or concerns they have about the parish's authenticity and/or transparency. Then, plan adequate time for staff to review/evaluate their feedback and use it to develop a communication plan that focuses on these values.



We are all asking the same question: how do we engage with this complex but passionate generation? As we overlay all that we know about them, we can see areas of real alignment with church teachings--inclusion, social justice, human rights, and care for our common home. Additionally, the Church provides many of the things Gen Z needs and wants: purpose, meaning, and acceptance. In these areas, their generation could be a powerful force within the Catholic Church because, as we have seen, when Gen Z feels strongly about something, they act on it.

The areas of difficulty in alignment with this generation also point to the issues the Church has in engaging with them: the basic mistrust of organized religion and the rejection of hierarchy and dogma.

Here are some other broad strokes that we must be thinking about to engage Gen Z in the short and long term.

Leveraging a variety of digital platforms will be key to making many of these strategies work simply because Gen Z will rarely, if ever, go looking for answers on parish or Catholic websites. Remember that optics matter--meaning that when Gen Z pays attention to the Church, they will notice if there is a lack of inclusivity in leadership. Promoting and celebrating women and minority leaders will be important.



Gen Z is inquisitive and seeks to understand the world better. The Church can offer educational initiatives that explain Church teachings, Scripture, and the liturgy in a concise and engaging manner. This can help bridge the gap between the Church's traditional teachings and the values of the younger generation.

Participation in community service and humanitarian efforts will appeal to Gen Z's passion for social activism. This aligns with the Church's mission of charity and serves as a practical way for young individuals to see that these things are also important to the Church.

Engaging with Gen Z is essential for the Catholic church to remain relevant and vibrant in the modern world and to pass the faith on to the next generation—and the next. Many of these strategies are already being implemented, but we have more to do. In each of these areas, we should invite the Holy Spirit to inspire our creativity and help us discern new and best ways to reach Gen Z. Then, share those ideas and insights with others in the Catholic community so that we can replicate what is working, move fast to make course corrections, and share results,

Finally, we, as ministry partners, should add another strategy to this list: prayer. Praying for Generation Z in a specific, intentional, and purposeful way, we can take their precious souls to Christ and his Mother and entrust them to their care.

Mary, Mother of Good Counsel, pray for us.



Loving Gen Z: A Checklist for Prayer

As members of the Catholic Church, if we are to make progress in engaging with Gen Z, we need to ask ourselves some tough questions. Taking their experiences, values, challenges, and perspectives into consideration can open our eyes to where our ministries need to go deeper or broader. It may also reveal where we need to make some changes. But if we are to cultivate relationships with Gen Z, we need to first love them and fan the flames of our "zeal for souls."

- **Are we actively listening?** We should actively listen to the concerns, questions, and experiences of Gen Z. Create spaces for open dialogue and genuinely hear what they have to say.
- **Do we respect diversity?** Recognize the diversity within Gen Z, including varying cultural backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs. Embrace this diversity and make everyone feel welcome.
- **Do we have youth representation?** Encourage youth representation in decision-making processes within the Church. Invite Gen Z members to have a say in the direction of youth ministry and parish activities.
- **Are we offering mentorship and guidance?** We should provide mentorship and guidance from older, experienced parishioners who can relate to Gen Z members, share their faith journeys, and offer support.
- **Are we addressing modern issues?** Engaging with contemporary issues and challenges that matter to Gen Z, such as social justice, climate change, mental health, and diversity and inclusion, is an important way to connect with them.
- **Are we maximizing the use of our digital communication?** Utilize technology, social media, and digital platforms to connect with Gen Z, share information, and engage in conversations relevant to their lives.
- **Do we embrace social justice?** Actively involve Gen Z in social justice initiatives and community service projects. Highlight the Church's commitment to addressing societal issues they are passionate about. Promote Catholic Social Teaching and its relevance to social justice and ethical living, which align with Gen Z's values.

- **Are we open to their questions?** Encourage Gen Z to ask questions about faith, theology, and moral issues. Provide opportunities for them to explore their faith and seek answers to their inquiries.
- **Can we cultivate a safe space?** Create a safe and inclusive space within the parish where Gen Z can express themselves, discuss their challenges, and feel a sense of belonging.
- **Do we minister specifically to Gen Z-aged people?** Ministries and programs that cater to the needs and interests of Gen Z are important. Offer a variety of activities and events that resonate with their spirituality and sense of community.
- **Can we provide mental health support?** How can we offer guidance and support for those dealing with anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.
- **Do we provide educational opportunities?** Interactive educational opportunities accommodate Gen Z's preferred learning styles, such as technology-enhanced learning, multimedia, and group discussions.
- **How can we acknowledge their unique challenges?** Acknowledge the challenges Gen Z faces, such as navigating the digital age, economic instability, and the changing landscape of relationships and identity.
- **Are we truly authentic?** Be authentic and transparent in interactions with Gen Z. Admit when the Church has made mistakes and demonstrate a commitment to positive change.



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Let's Talk

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