**A Challenge for Ordinary Time**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

*“To understand the man you have to know what was happening in the world when he was twenty.”*

This quote, attributed to Napoleon Buonaparte, is on my mind. Because I have the privilege of teaching students in their twenties, I think a lot about their world. Indeed, the further I age away from my own twenties, the more I think about the world my students will inherit.

I have some quibbles with the notion that the state of the world when a man or woman turns twenty will be *the* defining influence since much that is important can happen long before and after that point.

Yet, the time someone turns twenty ushers in a critically important time. It is when pivotal decisions are made about education and career. It is often when calls to marriage or to religious life may start, or become clearer. It is when habits of spending, socializing, and recreating begin to be set. It is often when a first move away from a family home precipitates decisions about how to live a life both independent and interdependent. It is when debt unwisely undertaken can burden the years ahead, and when friendships wisely cultivated yield a lifelong treasure. It is when relationships to pleasure can become prudent sources of joy or decadent forays into excess. It is when attachments to the good and bad of the virtual world can be cemented.

But, something else can happen. In this decade of life, decisions about how and whether to practice one’s faith belong solely to the young adult. Family ties and traditions may be less influential. Catholic education may have ended with Confirmation or graduation from a Catholic high school or college. Parish connections may have waned in the long “gap years” between completing religious education and, perhaps, returning for marriage preparation. The increasing youthful demands of the urgent can too easily take the place of the quieter demands of the important. All too often, the twenties are a time when many become adrift in matters of faith.

If it be true that to “understand” others we must “understand what was happening in the world” when theyturned twenty, I worry about the religious landscape in which today’s twenty-somethings are coming of age.

Recent statistics released by the Pew Research Center are startling. In the United States, the percentage of those who claim no religious affiliation is up ten points in the past ten years. The percentage who identify as Christians is down twelve points. The ratio of those identifying as “nones” with no religious affiliation at all is now three out of ten. Only 45% of Americans claim to pray daily, and one third claim they never pray.

I am usually a “glass half full” observer of the world. Yet, this snapshot saddens and worries me. I fear those coming of age today may no longer see belief in a loving God, fidelity to His plans, and attachment to His Church as important, good, or life-giving. They may not see that there is far more beyond life in this world because we, their elders, may not be teaching that in our words, examples, and lives.

It is easy to curse the darkness, pointing to other people and institutions whose deeds or misdeeds may have contributed to this. It is easy to blame “society” and “culture.” There is a time and place for this.

But, I want to pose a more difficult challenge to myself and all who care about the world we are bequeathing to the next generation. The challenge is simply this: What can *I* do to make the world a better place for those coming after me to know, love and serve God as they come of age. So …

* Have *I* invited a younger person to come to Mass or a special parish event with me?
* Do *I* know my faith well enough so that, if asked, I can give a reason for my hope with a depth that a skeptical young heart may need to hear?
* Do *I* live life in a way that is consistent with what I say I believe so that a good example in even a small matter can be an antidote to the poison of hypocrisy that drives so many away?
* Am *I* willing to, publically, tell another that my faith is a source of joy, a well of strength – and a challenge as well?
* Do *I* care enough about the young people in my life to both tell them the truth and to love them unconditionally?
* Do *I* gossip, constantly criticize, jockey for influence or whine about what is unimportant – thus feeding into the worst stereotypes of the falsely pious?
* Do *I* live life in a way that just might make someone say, *“I want to know more about what she believes and in Whom she believes?*

As 2022 lurches forward, my answers to these questions are, honestly, not what they should be or what twenty-somethings deserve to have them be But, maybe this is the year for us to take on this challenge so that all who turn twenty this year can look back at “what was happening in the world” in 2022 and see that someone inspired them to live with faith and hope and love. To all who turn twenty this year … Happy Birthday! To all of us past that point, I hope that you will join me in taking on this holy challenge in ordinary time.

*May God bless you and yours.*

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