

The "Me, Me, Me Generation"

Since 2000 Empathy Declines Among College Students

There are many factors which determine the degree of empathy a person might have. Over the past two decades unprecedented sociological changes have occurred. Perhaps we have all become so accustomed to using the internet that we have forgotten that in 1993 there were only 623 web sites on the world wide web. A recent study by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research analyzed data on empathy among college students over the past thirty years and found the biggest drop after the year 2000. "College kids today are about 40 percent lower in empathy than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago, as measured by standard tests of this personality trait." Compared to college students of the late 1970s, the study found, college students today are less likely to agree with statements such as "I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective" and "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me."

"Many people see the current group of college students — sometimes called 'Generation Me' — as one of the most self-centered, narcissistic, competitive, confident and individualistic in recent history," said Konrath, who is also affiliated with the University of Rochester Department of Psychiatry.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS:

- "The increase in exposure to media during this time period could be one factor."
- "Compared to 30 years ago, the average American now is exposed to three times as much nonwork-related information."
- "In terms of media content, this generation of college students grew up with video games, and a growing body of research, including work done by my colleagues at Michigan, is establishing that exposure to violent media numbs people to the pain of others."
- "The ease of having 'friends' online might make people more likely to just tune out when they don't feel like responding to others' problems, a behavior that could carry over offline."

Add in the hypercompetitive atmosphere and inflated expectations of success, borne of celebrity "reality shows," and you have a social environment that works against slowing down and listening to someone who needs a bit of sympathy." "College students today may be so busy worrying about themselves and their own issues that they don't have time to spend empathizing with others, or at least perceive such time to be limited."

Steps Parents Can Take With Their Children

Parents can spend some time discussing these "contributing factors" and determine how much their children may be affected by these things. Once determined, changes can be made that limit their exposure to these things and counter act them with

activities that naturally teach empathy. How much time are children using Facebook for example or playing video games? What kind of social relationships are developing in their lives? The very reason Youth Groups exist at Church is to give children opportunities to put their faith into action. By learning empathy through creating a healthy social network between our youth, empathetic skills are taught. One dynamic often occurring at Church camps is that lasting friendships are made and by working through conflicts with others vital lessons in empathy are being learned. The other thing parents must do is examine how much they have been affected by these "contributing factors" as well. If I am a narcissistic (excessive self-preoccupation, self-absorption) parent I am going to abandon my responsibilities and forfeit spending quality time with my children. Consequently, video games, Facebook and television become welcome baby sitters. The tragedy is that the next generation will be left without the ability to have successful relationships and even worse, fall into sinful habits that seek to fulfill what was missing in their development.

Why Going To Church Does Not Matter To The "Me, Me, Me Generation"

I submit the reason this generation has inconsistent and/or minimal Church attendance is because the true gospel is unintelligible to them. For the gospel of Christ to be heard by the "Me, Me, Me Generation" instead of being centered on Christ it gets distorted and centers on "ME!" This is why the "self-centered" gospels of the latest preachers of "How I can have a better life and my best life" and Oprah's "secret" all come from the point of view that the universe revolves around "Me." The result is people rate churches based upon how successfully their focus matches personal perceptions of what it means to be a Christian, a priest or a leader. This distortion has devastating consequences because it does not ask for nor require any changing or conforming on our part to become integrated within the mind of the Church.

This generation cannot relate to the true gospel that starts with God emptying Himself. Indeed, He does this as an expression of unconditional love however, in order to become a follower of Christ we must empty ourselves and become one with one another. The gospel of God's disclosing Himself primarily as a movement and revelation of His own empathy is clearly given by St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians.

"If there be then any comfort in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any communion of the Spirit, if any affection from the inward parts and compassionate feelings, make full my joy, that you be minding the same thing, having the same love, united in soul, minding the one thing, doing nothing according to factious ambition or vainglory, but in humility esteeming one another above themselves, not looking each one to one's own things, but each also to the things of others. For let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, Who, existing in the form of God, deemed it not a prize to be seized to be equal with God; but He emptied Himself and took the form of a slave, and came to be in the likeness of men. [Phil. 2:1-7]

The Loss of Empathy & Our Salvation

Any Christian who has even a minimal knowledge of the gospel of Christ knows that without empathy no one can be saved. The twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew which is read every year on "Judgment Sunday" (the separation of the goats from the sheep) teaches that those who practice empathy towards others are the ones who enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. The absence of empathy is a serious sin because our Lord Jesus taught that every human being is to be ministered to as if they were Him. One can even say that it is because our God is an empathetic God that He decides to reveal Himself on earth as a man in order to save us from sin and death. It is not too far an extrapolation to say that when a society loses the ability to be empathetic it has lost contact with the living God.

In Christ's Love,
+Fr. Andrew