

Nones Eating Naan

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Nones Eating Naan begins in the Franciscan Shanthi Ashram's kitchen with Fr. George Munjanattu's cooking. Food, every campus minister believes, is a way to students' hearts. The word 'none' in a broad sense identifies people who are "spiritual but not religious." A general definition of 'none' is "someone who answers 'none' or 'none of the above' when asked about religious preference, affiliation, or identity."¹ Naan is an Indian flatbread. *Nones Eating Naan* is a simple listening session with students from all faith paths, especially those struggling with religion.

The Roman Catholic Church faces a pressing dilemma: millions leave the church as they become young adults. Some are lost forever, while others live wrestling with their own spiritual identity. Robert Barron, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, spoke to the Spring 2019 General Assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, mentioning the rise of nones: "Half of the kids that we baptized and confirmed in the last 30 years are now ex-Catholics or unaffiliated."² Though the rise of the 'nones' is not a recent problem, an investigation of the data indicates that we are at the highest point so far in their rise.

The church has several programs in place to attract and minister to young Catholics whose beliefs and lifestyles are more traditional, but not for those who wrestle with religion. Unfortunately, churches seem slow to respond, and have so far failed to engage, reconnect, or attract these young adults back to the faith and the church through existing programs.

How can we attract the nones?

Kaya Oakes, in her book *The Nones are Alright*, says if we do not think about a ministry to the messy, muddled kind of faith of Catholic 'nones,' the Church is headed for empty parishes, a massive priest shortage, a hemorrhaging of its lifeblood in the young.³

One of the ideas that occurred to us is *Nones Eating Naan*. With the assistance of one our students, Mary Wurtz, the friars began this ministry at Bellarmine University in 2020. It is now one of our most-attended programs.

"I thought campus ministry was strictly a religious space, and people like myself who struggle with religion might not be welcomed, and this meeting changed that perception," a student who attend Nones Eating Naan said.

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Conversation can change minds. Listening can bring miracles. In *Christus Vivit*, a Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to young people and to the entire people of God, Pope Francis uses the story of Emmaus as a way to comprehend the battle of young people with their faith, and the call of the community “to enter into their night” to help them to return to the community. Pope Francis describes what this outreach looks like:

Jesus walks with two disciples who did not grasp the meaning of all that happened to him and are leaving Jerusalem and the community behind. Wanting to accompany them, he joins them on the way. He asks them questions and listens patiently to their version of the events, and in this way, he helps them recognize what they were experiencing. Then, with affection and power, he proclaims the word to them, leading them to interpret the events they had experienced in the light of the Scriptures. He accepts their invitation to stay with them as evening falls; he enters into their night. The model that Jesus proposed in the Emmaus story - accompanying, listening, and providing a community - can bring miracles.⁴

Listening means learning to be silent, and not just waiting until the other person is finished talking. We must listen so as to hear and truly understand what

is going on inside the other person and the significance of their personal experience. This requires us to go beyond ourselves,

to move past our own ways of seeing things, of formulating and resolving problems, in order to enter into another’s way of seeing. Without this invitation and listening, Jesus would have remained a stranger.⁵

Pope Francis says “*The art of accompaniment invites us to remove sandals before the sacred ground of the other. Accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze, which heals, liberates, and encourages growth in the Christian life.*”⁶

For Franciscans, relationship is in our blood. It is the operative spiritual path in the Franciscan way of life. As young people struggle with God, church, and belief, what can bring them to engage their questions? What can be a starting point to reconnect them to the church? It is relationship.



Relationship does not just happen; it must be intentional. We see relational images of the connection between God and humanity in the writings of Francis of Assisi. St. Francis learned this relational dimension of the love of God, and our call to enter into love, through the incarnation narrative where God-becomes-human.

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For this reason, Francis held the Nativity in greater reverence than any other of the Lord's solemnities.⁷ Francis often used the familial term in his writings: "Let each one love and care for his brother as a mother loves and cares for her son."⁸

This image of 'mother loves son' is a relational model that Francis offers in a ministry to the 'nones.' It means this relationship is intentional, focused, and engaging. This model is essential in the ministry to the 'nones.' In short, Franciscan spirituality inspires us to continue what the Lord has begun in His incarnation.

Programs like *Nones Eating Naan* help campus ministers like me comprehend some of the causes of disaffiliation from religion among young people. Several have said they stopped going to church because of their views and sexual orientation, the unwelcoming nature of the church, judgments that they faced from the community, hypocrisy in the church, etc.

Two students who studied at a Catholic institution

shared their stories of isolation by classmates because of their orientation. They said: "We felt no compassion from the church or from our classmates. Because of our orientation, we left the church. No one asked why we left until today."

Most of the feedback indicates that though they have lost trust in the institutional Church, but they still feel connections through social service, community, and the Sacraments. One participant said: "I still find a connection with the church that is the passion for social justice. I go to the soup kitchen with the Friars."

Young people are intentional about their commitments and able to live purposeful and reflective lives, but often feel that they are not supported or listened to by the church or community of the faithful. *Nones Eating Naan* shows that accompaniment, listening, and community will attract, reattract, and reignite young people's faith. We need to create other engaging programs like *Nones Eating Naan* in our communities and on campuses to attract nones, then listen and engage to ignite their faith.



1 Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 23.

2 Carol Zimmermann, "Catholic Church Should Focus on Getting 'nones' Back, Bishop Barron Says," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 12, 2019, (Accessed June 9, 2020), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/catholic-church-should-focus-getting-nones-back-bishop-barron-says>.

3 Kaya Oakes, *The Nones Are Alright: A New Generation of Believers, Seekers, and Those in Between* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 96–97.

4 Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 1st ed. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Pub. 2019), 111.

5 Marcel Dumais, *After Emmaus: Biblical Models for the New Evangelization* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 64.

6 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, 169, (Accessed June 16, 2020), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

7 Daniel P. Horan, *Franciscan Spirituality for the 21st Century: Selected Reflections from the Dating God Blog and Other Essays: Volume One*, (Boston, MA: Koinonia Press, 2013), 10.

8 *Ibid.*, 38.