

“Do not speak harshly to an older man, but appeal to him as a father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters in complete purity” (1 Timothy 5:1-2).

One of the great beauties of the Christian community is that everyone is invited. Young or old, rich or poor, black or white, Christ invites everyone to become members of his Body, the Church. The great variety of people in the Church provides a powerful witness of the bounty of God’s unconditional love. At the same time, however, whenever so many different people gather in a single community, like a parish, there are bound to be differences in opinion and expectations, differences that can sometimes lead to conflicts. In few ways is this more evident than in the differences between age groups in the Church.

We might think that the “generation gap,” the cultural and behavioral distance between one generation of people and the next, is a product of our modern, fast-paced world. While the technological advances of the past century or so have certainly sped change up and perhaps made the generation gap more pronounced, they did not create that gap. As we see in Paul’s words to his coworker, Timothy, in the above Scripture passage, differences between age groups were an issue for the Christian community as far back 2000 years ago, and they continue to be an issue today.

One of the most significant generational conflicts today can be seen between the youngest members of our parish community and the most senior members of our community. The scenario is not uncommon: an infant begins to cry or a young child begins to fidget as the embarrassed young parents hastily seek to calm the child down. Meanwhile, a pew or two behind the young family, an elderly parishioner, who may already have difficulty hearing or seeing what is happening at Mass due to the effects of age, is completely distracted by the child’s behavior. A reproachful look and perhaps some whispered criticisms follow, making the young family feel quite unwelcome. The Mass ends, and both the young family and the elderly parishioner leave the church with hard feelings.

What is missing in this scenario? Charity. Paul’s words to Timothy above remind us today that as members of Christ we are all family, and we are called to treat the members of our family of faith with the same love, respect, and patience we show to our family by blood or legal relationship. That means that parents need to teach their children how to participate appropriately at Mass and, out of love and respect for our elderly parishioners, if their child acts up, to temporarily take him or her to the children’s room or the gathering space until he or she calms down and can rejoin the gathered community in the church. Christian charity also means that other members of the parish, including our elderly parishioners, out of love and respect for our young families, need to exercise patience when a child acts up and, instead of harsh looks and criticism, offer young parents prayerful support. Through such mutual acts of charity, scenarios like that above become, not occasions for ill will, but opportunities for growth, growth in the love of God shared with us in his Son, Jesus Christ. Let us share that love with one another, no matter what our differences, and grow together as a family of faith here at St. Boniface.