

June 25, 2013

Dear Friends,

The Pew Research Center reported that 46 million Americans have no religious affiliation. The report was entitled, *"Nones" on the Rise: One in Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation* (October 9, 2012). Their ranks include 13 million atheists and agnostics 6% of the U. S. public.

The report's conclusion was that "the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One fifth of the U. S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today." A major factor in the rise of the percentage of the non-affiliated is the gradual replacement of an older generation with a younger generation.

In addition to generational replacement, the number of Baby Boomers and Generations Xers has also become more religiously unaffiliated in recent years. One surprising discovery was that an overwhelming majority of the "nones" were brought up in a religious tradition.

Historically speaking, there were times that the percentage of people attending church was very low. In *Gotham, the History of New York City to 1898*, the author wrote, Vice and profanity was widespread in Colonial New York. The Reverend John Miller reported back to his Anglican bishop in London that the city had become a sink of "irreligion, drunkenness, cursing and swearing, fornication and adultery, thieving and other evils." If the people bothered to go to church at all it was, "to find out faults in him that preacheth rather than to hear their own" (p. 103).

Bishop Michael Begley was the first Bishop of the Diocese of Charlotte (1972 – 1984). I heard Bishop Begley say many times in his homilies that of the six million people who lived in North Carolina, one million did not know God. Every generation must be converted. To be born into the faith is not enough. Each person must answer the call of the Living Christ to come follow him. In his crusades, the Reverend Billy Graham (born, Charlotte, 1918) would say "Just because you were born in a garage doesn't mean that you are a car." Every generation must be converted.

Pope Francis said, "We Christians have been called one-by-one: none of us is Christian by pure chance, no one." (June 25, 2013) The Lord asks all of us, "What do you think of me?" Jesus is more than an historical figure. "Jesus is living in front of us. This question is asked by a living person. And we have to respond from the heart." (June 23, 2013)

In St. Peter's Square on June 23rd, Pope Francis had a special appeal for the young people, "Go courageously against the tide to serve the truth of Christ and do not accept the damaged values of society that ruin lives and take away hope. To lose one life for the cause of Jesus may mean expressing faith, but it can also mean by implication to defend the truth."

My nephew, who first brought this poll to my attention, said "People who don't believe are typically fragile. Be kind to them. Be loving to them. Be an example to them. It may do nothing, but give them another opportunity to think on what they believe just a little harder. Most of the time, that's all it takes."