

Radio talk shows fill some of my driving time. Recently, financial advisors described members of the millennial generation, born between 1982 and 2004. This young cohort is known for spending money to gain experiences rather than saving it. Advisors question the apparent lack of retirement planning.

The striving for experiences is seen as a negative thing by some older critics. Rather than join the critics, I suggest that we mine that attitude for the positives. After all, isn't everything an experience? And aren't we too quick to judge negatively those younger people who look for Church to provide an "experience"?

My present thoughts center around Sunday worship, but can apply to other events. These are my opinions, not official teachings. For the first 10 years of my life, St. Pat's Church was an experience. It was hard to see over the adults until First Communion. I read my missal that translated the Latin.

Other things drew me in: Three Sundays in each month, cooking odors wafted up from the lower level. On one day, it would be pancakes. On another, spaghetti sauce. On a third, bacon, eggs and coffee. Mass would last 35-40 minutes, and then another 40 minutes might be spent at the father-son breakfast, the Scouts fund-raiser, the mother-daughter breakfast. As liturgies got longer everywhere, the social gatherings grew less frequent.

Thank heaven, coffee, juice and doughnuts seem to continue in most Catholic parishes. We should think about these things the next time millennials, if they go to church at all, tell us that they like the coffee bar in their church's gathering space.

Church experts point out other components of the "experience" that, I believe, are valid. It includes the parking lot experience. I know Catholics who can name, without pausing to think, which parishes have unpleasant parking situations. Their estimation is based on levels of courtesy (driving and interpersonal) they experience both entering and leaving. Pastoral councils do well to talk about this. There is the landscaping element, or whether the campus appears to be cared for in summer and winter. Neatness is not the same as "cared for."

There is the restroom experience — people are a little nervous the first time they attend a church, and the bathroom is a first stop. Cleanliness, absence of unpleasant odors, good lighting and a sufficient amount of plumbing are key. If the fixtures date back to the Nixon administration, we should not be surprised if someone does not return for next Sunday's service. Just sayin'. A clean and functional changing table also helps.

Someone might say that the physical environment is not as important as the spiritual offerings. If we think about our homes, restaurants and doctors' offices, we already know that physical spaces are important. These not only express moods, but shape them. Anyone who has redone a bathroom or a kitchen instinctively knows this.

The philosopher in St. Thomas Aquinas taught that everything we know comes through our five senses. These capacities don't start to work at the beginning of the entrance hymn, or stop after the recessional. Many so-called millennials know this in a way that some of us have forgotten. They will not be moved by an idea of faith and worship, but by actual perceptions of sight, sound, touch, taste and smell.

Maybe we should be grateful to millennials who can help us to return our senses.