

Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice

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Thomas P. Rausch, S.J.



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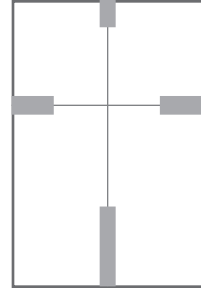
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Eugene R. Growney, S.J.

In memoriam

Contents



Acknowledgments ix

Introduction xi

Characteristics of Catholic Identity xii

Diverse Perspectives xv

CHAPTER 1

Young Adult Catholics 1

The Research 3

A Diminished Catholic Identity 4

Contributing Factors 9

Conclusion 18

CHAPTER 2

The Catholic Imagination 20

Approaching the Ultimate 23

Roots of the Catholic Imagination 24

Catholic and Protestant Expressions 27

Conclusion 35

CHAPTER 3

The Catholic Tradition and *The Da Vinci Code* 36

Questionable Sources 37

The Church's Struggle with Gnosticism 39

Jesus and Mary Magdalene 45

Other Errors 47

Conclusion 49

CHAPTER 4

- The Domestic Church** 51
 Handing on the Faith 52
 The Church in the Home 53
 Expressions of the Domestic Church 57
 Conclusion 64

CHAPTER 5

- Catholic Colleges and Universities** 66
 The Process of Professionalization 67
 Ex Corde Ecclesiae 69
 Theology and Religious Studies 71
 Preserving Catholic Identity 75
 Conclusion 85

CHAPTER 6

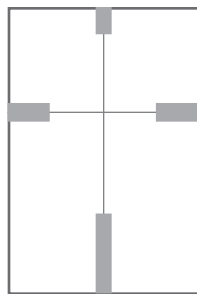
- A New Generation?** 87
 Evangelical Catholics 89
 Seminarians 91
 Younger Catholic Theologians 96
 Converts and Reverts 99
 Conclusion 100

CHAPTER 7

- Some Concluding Reflections** 102
 Spiritual but not Religious 102
 Authority in a Church of Choice 105
 Catholic Identity and the New Apologists 109
 The Uniqueness of Catholicism 111
 Conclusion 114

- Index** 120

Acknowledgments



The basic inspiration for this book came from a College Theology Society panel in June, 2005 on William Portier's paper, "Here Come the Evangelical Catholics."¹ Though I drew on a number of surveys, much of its research and its subtitle come from the work of Dean R. Hoge and his associates, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice*.² Part of Chapter 6 appeared in *America* magazine in October 2002 under the title, "Another Generation Gap." I'm grateful to Susan Sink of Fullerton College, Fullerton, California, who did the copyediting and to our graduate assistant, Deb Pavelek, for her careful proofreading and suggestions.

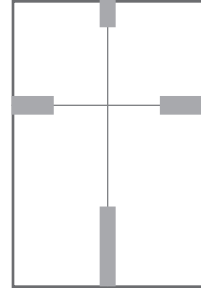
Catholic identity is a many faceted issue. While the profile emerging from various surveys of young Catholics raises some serious questions about how the Church hands on its tradition and incorporates young people into its life, I want to express my admiration for the many young people I've met in my years of teaching. I have learned much from them, and appreciate the many gifts they bring to the Church.

Thomas P. Rausch, S.J.

¹ William L. Portier, "Here Come the Evangelical Catholics," *Communio* 31 (Spring 2004) 35–66.

² Dean R. Hoge, William D. Dinges, Mary Johnson, and Juan L. Gonzales, Jr., *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

Introduction



What will the next generation of Catholics be like? Will they have a strong sense of their Catholic identity, or will they reflect a more generic Christian identity, without the distinctives associated with Catholicism? A number of social commentators such as Dean R. Hoge and James J. Davidson and their associates suggest that the Catholic identity of young Catholics is in jeopardy.¹ Others today argue that there are signs that a new generation of younger Catholics is emerging, not all of whom fall easily into the liberal/conservative categories, though many Catholics over fifty tend to dismiss them as conservative, neoconservative, or even restorationist.

Catholic identity is an issue not only for young adults. Catholics of all ages are grappling with how to preserve a sense of who they are. In a predominantly secular, postmodern culture—Hoge calls it a “culture of choice”—many people are constructing their own religious identities.² Religious affiliation or church membership is strictly voluntary, to be chosen on the basis of personal preference.

Furthermore, many younger Catholics are quite unfamiliar with their religious tradition. The Scriptures are a mystery to them, they know little of the history or doctrine of their church, and few would be able to tell the stories of the saints.

¹ James D. Davidson and Dean R. Hoge, “Catholics After the Scandal: A New Study’s Major Findings,” *Commonweal* 131/20 (November 19, 2004) 13–18.

² Dean R. Hoge, William D. Dinges, Mary Johnson, Juan L. Gonzales, Jr., *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

So what are the characteristics of a Catholic identity? What are its root metaphors, its interpretative impulses? How and where does it encounter the divine?

Characteristics of Catholic Identity

Before looking at what Catholics believe, it is important to understand how they experience the world and God. In his book, *Catholicism*, Richard McBrien identifies two characteristic foci of the Catholic tradition—one philosophical, the other theological.³

The philosophical focus is Christian realism. Realism means that knowledge begins from experience, but moves beyond it. Catholic thought recognizes that critical reason can pierce the phenomenal veil and grasp, however imperfectly, the mystery of the absolute implied in its questioning and its knowing. It also knows that God has first addressed us with the divine word, mediated by the Hebrew Scriptures, proclaimed by the prophets, and ultimately incarnated in the Word become flesh. If sacred Scripture witnesses to God's self-disclosure in human history and experience, it is still the word of God in the words of human beings, and so must be interpreted in a way that honors both its human modalities of expression and the divine initiative that lies behind it.

Because of the inclusive nature of Catholicism, it is not bound to a single philosophy, theology, or theological school, but is able to draw on and utilize many approaches and methods. Catholicism is pluralistic in its approach to truth. At the same time, there is a distinctively Catholic way of integrating the pluralism of philosophies and theologies in the search for the truth.

Catholicism rejects both idealism and naïve realism, along with the latter's offspring, empiricism and biblical fundamentalism. Human beings discover meaning through experience, but also through critical questioning, historical investigation, systematizing ideas, and asking further questions. Knowledge is more than taking a look. Like the operation of the intellect itself, the knower must return always to the concrete, the experiential, and the observable. This is true even in the realm of faith. Even if faith is a gift and calls for trust, reason and faith must work in consort.

³ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) 1192–1200.

McBrien also points to three theological foci of Catholicism: sacramentality, mediation, and communion. Sacramentality refers to the sense for the disclosure of the divine mystery through a nature damaged but still graced. God is not distant, so transcendent as to be beyond our reach, but reflected in the beauty of nature, intuited in human love, grasped in the experience of community.

Mediation stresses that grace, God's invisible presence, is always disclosed or experienced through some concrete symbol or event, first of all in the man Jesus, then through other signs and instruments of salvation, natural, scriptural, and ecclesial. As Louis-Marie Chauvet says, "Reality is never present to us except in a mediated way, which is to say, constructed out of the symbolic network of the culture which fashions us."⁴

The encounter with God is always a mediated experience. In the Catholic tradition, grace is mediated in a special way by the sacraments; they both symbolize and cause. Baptism symbolizes new life in Christ and mediates it by initiating the one baptized into a community where Christ is proclaimed, praised, and celebrated by those living in his Spirit. Penance proclaims God's forgiveness and reconciliation to those who seek it in Jesus' name. Marriage celebrates and makes real God's unconditional love and Christ's union with his people in the love of husband and wife for each other and for the children born of their love.

In traditional Catholic language, grace builds on nature. Unlike Reformation theology, Catholicism takes a "both-and" approach; not Scripture alone, but Scripture and tradition; not faith alone, but faith and works as well as faith and reason; not grace alone, but grace and nature.

Communion recognizes that our way to God is communal. God deals with us as a people and touches us through others; one cannot be a Christian alone. Mediation is always made possible by the community, for Catholicism recognizes the radically social nature of the human person. Catholicism is nervous about a religious individualism that reduces the life of grace to a "personal relationship" with Jesus, without reference to the mediating and challenging role of the community. Our relationship to God cannot be separated from our relationships to other human beings; we cannot be "saved" all by ourselves. The Church is a pilgrim people; we are always "on the way."

⁴ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995) 41.

Andrew Greeley says that sacramentality, community, and hierarchy distinguish Catholicism.⁵ Acknowledging the work of David Tracy, he sees the distinctive experience of Catholics as rooted in their Catholic or “sacramental” imagination. “Catholics,” he writes, “live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures,” which are for him only hints of a much deeper religious sensitivity to the divine presence lurking in created reality, in nature, stories, human loves, and religious symbols.⁶ The sacramental imagination prizes art and the symbolic, it emphasizes community, and recognizes the place of hierarchy. We will explore Greeley’s sacramental imagination and consider its theological roots in a further chapter.

Catholicism as an Ecclesial Faith

For Catholic Christians, the Church is always more than a community formed in response to the word, a voluntary assembly of the faithful, or a visible religious institution; the Church mediates God’s saving presence through its Scriptures, its tradition, its preaching, teaching, ministry, worship, and fellowship. Catholicism is an essentially ecclesial faith.

Catholic identity traditionally has included for Catholics a sense for the historical uniqueness of their Church; they understand it as a worldwide, visible community, now almost two thousand years old, with roots stretching back to the church of the apostles. They have a reverence for its hierarchical ministry, its papal-episcopal teaching authority, and its tradition. That tradition includes sacramentality, a strong liturgical tradition centered on the Eucharist, an incarnational theology, a lively sense for the communion of the saints with a special veneration of Mary the “mother of God,” a rich tradition of spirituality, mysticism, and contemplative prayer. Catholics honor monasticism and the religious life, have a sense for the complementarity of faith and reason, and a deep appreciation of the religious value of art. They have a strong sense for community, including a communal understanding of sin and salvation and a highly developed social teaching based on the dignity of the human

⁵ Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 137.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1; cf. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1986).

person and the principle of the common good.⁷ Solidarity is a key concept.

We might summarize these attempts to delineate a Catholic identity by pointing to an ecclesial faith, a visible, hierarchical church, a sacramental imagination, a theology that seeks to integrate both faith and reason, and a strong communal sense.

Diverse Perspectives

We will explore the question of Catholic identity today from a number of different perspectives. Chapter 1 reviews a number of recent studies on young Catholics. Focusing on their religious individualism, these studies call attention to their less ecclesial faith, their “thin” commitment to the institutional church, their tendency to construct their own religious identities, and their lack of familiarity with the stories, root metaphors, and doctrines of their tradition. While some no longer practice their faith or have “left” the Church, there is also a smaller group of young people strongly committed to the Church.

Drawing on the work of Greeley, Chapter 2 studies the Catholic sacramental imagination, contrasting the way Catholics and Protestants experience the holy as well as the theological insights and religious anthropologies that underlie and support their respective religious imaginations.

Chapter 3 looks at Dan Brown’s enormously popular book, *The Da Vinci Code*. Reviewing the book’s charges against the Catholic Church brings to light the Church’s formative role in shaping the Christian tradition, particularly in its biblical and theological expressions. Given the pluralism of contemporary Christianity and the general ignorance of Christian origins, recovering an informed sense for that role is essential to an adult Catholic identity.

Chapter 4 examines the “domestic church,” the Christian family that plays such an important role in developing the religious identity and experience of those who grow up in Christian homes. For Catholics that identity is mediated through story and symbol, prayer, ritual, and sacrament, with the family itself as the primary sacramental experience.

⁷ Thomas P. Rausch, *Catholicism in the Third Millennium*, Second Edition (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003) xii–xiv.

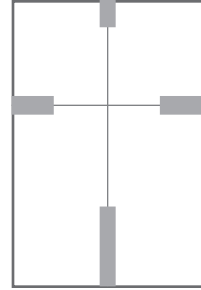
Chapter 5 turns to Catholic colleges and universities, institutions of higher learning where the Church does its thinking and future generations of Catholics are given the opportunity to become familiar with the rich heritage of their faith. Originally institutions created by the Church to bring an immigrant Catholic population into the mainstream, today those institutions, aware of the loss of religious identity of so many originally Protestant schools, are caught up in a struggle to preserve and enhance their Catholic identity in the predominantly secular, post-modernist culture of the academy.

Chapter 6 turns to a significant and growing minority of young Catholics who are passionate about their faith and enthusiastic in their identity as Catholic Christians. While some of the Vatican II generation are too quick to dismiss this group as neoconservative, restorationist, or sectarian, for a number of reasons such designations are too facile. The defining moments in their young lives are simply different from those a generation or two ahead of them. With so many seminarians, religious, and theologians among them, many see them as moving into leadership positions in tomorrow's Church.

Chapter 7 offers some concluding reflections on a number of issues considered earlier, among them spirituality, authority in the Church, the new apologists, and the uniqueness of the Catholic Church, exploring them at a greater depth.

Chapter 1

Young Adult Catholics



How often have we heard people say, “I’m spiritual but not religious”? This often remarked upon disconnecting of spirituality from religion means, in effect, that more and more Americans are choosing their own religious identity.

A new study on the spiritual life of college students by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute surveyed 3,680 undergraduates from 46 diverse colleges and universities. The study’s findings were optimistic, reporting a high level of spiritual engagement and commitment among college students. Seventy-seven percent of students said “we are all spiritual beings,” and 71 percent reported that they “gain spiritual strength by trusting in a higher power.” Among third-year students, three in four reported that they prayed, discussed religion and spirituality with friends, and found religion personally helpful. Some 86 percent of those surveyed listed attaining wisdom as an “essential” or “very important” goal in life. However the “ultimate spiritual quest” most often selected included “to become a better person” (30 percent), “to know what God requires of me” (14 percent), and “to know my purpose in life” (13 percent).

At the same time, most of the respondents acknowledged a decline in religious practice during their college years. More than half (52 percent) reported attending religious services frequently before entering college, but by their junior year less than one-third (29 percent) attended frequently; only 9 percent said that their spirituality had become stronger.¹

In 2004 the survey was expanded to first-year students at 236 institutions. Again the students reported high levels of spiritual interest and

¹ See www.spirituality.ucla.edu.

involvement. Interestingly, in this survey the highest percentage of entering freshmen was Catholic (28 percent), followed by mainline Protestants (17 percent), Baptists (13 percent), and "other Christians" (11 percent). Catholic respondents tended to score *below* the overall average on religious commitment, religious engagement, religious/social conservatism, and religious skepticism (the last being unusual, since those who score low on the first three standards usually score high on religious skepticism).

The discrepancy between the optimistic charting of spiritual interest and the low level of religious practice or spiritual growth leads one to wonder if the researchers may have defined spirituality too broadly, even uncritically. Many social scientists tend to write as though religion and spirituality are mutually exclusive. Religion is narrowly described as formal and institutional, while spirituality is seen as personal and experiential.²

The UCLA researchers sought to assess student spirituality and religiousness on the basis of twelve "scales," spirituality, being on a spiritual quest, equanimity, charitable involvement, compassionate self-concept, an ethic of caring, and an ecumenical worldview as well as five indicators of student religiousness: religious commitment, engagement, skepticism, struggle, and religious/social conservatism. Missing was any real effort to survey "practice" such as ascetic discipline, bodily exercise, regular prayer or meditation, journaling, spiritual direction, or service that traditionally have been considered signs of a genuine spirituality.³ But if the concept of spirituality in the UCLA survey seems "fuzzy," to use Zillbauer and Pargament's term,⁴ it may well be that the concept of spirituality shared by many young adults is equally fuzzy.

One of our concerns in this book is the religious identity of young adult Catholics. While there are different ways of measuring who count as young adults, I apply the term to those between the ages of 20 and 39, a group that constitutes about 40 percent of the U.S. Catholic population.

² For example, Brian Zillbauer and Kenneth Pargament et al., "Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy," *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36/4 (1997) 549–84; Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway, "'Being Religious' or 'Being Spiritual': in America: A Zero-Sum Proposition?" *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41/2 (2002) 289–300.

³ Cf. John A. Coleman, "Social Science and Spirituality," *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Malden, MA: Basil Blackwell, 2005) 289–307.

⁴ Cf. Zillbauer and Pargament, "Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy."

The description that follows generalizes trends as measured by surveys; it does not describe *all* those in this particular group. In addition to the UCLA study which is still in process, we will draw on a number of recent studies and surveys.

The Research

1. *The Search for Common Ground* (Davidson 1997)

James J. Davidson and his associates, in a national telephone poll, surveyed Catholics in 49 parishes in five Indiana dioceses. Their research appeared in 1997 under the title, *The Search for Common Ground: What Unites and Divides Catholic Americans*.⁵ It identified young Catholics as “post–Vatican II Catholics.”

2. *Young Adult Catholics* (Hoge 2001)

Another significant study specifically on young adult Catholics is Dean R. Hoge and his colleagues’ work, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice*. The study represents research done in 1997 on a sample of the twenty million young adult Catholics between 20 and 39 years of age, roughly 40 percent of the Catholic population.⁶ The researchers telephoned confirmands in 44 parishes in 11 dioceses throughout the nation. They also made a separate sample of Latinos. Because the research focused on young adult Catholics, it will be our basic source.

3. *Notre Dame Study* (Notre Dame 2004)

In 2002 the University of Notre Dame established a task force to survey the laity on issues facing the Church, with a special emphasis on generational differences. To identify these differences, the researchers identified four generations: pre–Vatican II Catholics (born in or before 1940), Vatican II Catholics, (born 1941–1960); post–Vatican II Catholics (born 1961–1977), and millennial Catholics (born 1978–1985). The researchers interviewed

⁵ Davidson, et al., *The Search for Common Ground: What Unites and Divides Catholic Americans* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997).

⁶ Dean R. Hoge, William D. Dinges, Mary Johnson, Juan L. Gonzales, Jr., *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) 3.

a random sample of 1,119 self-identified Catholics. The results were published in 2004.⁷

4. *National Catholic Reporter Survey (NCR 2005)*

Another useful instrument is an 18-year survey of Catholic attitudes and commitment, undertaken by Davidson, Hoge, William V. D'Antonio, and Mary Gautier at the suggestion of the *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR). The most recent results of this survey were published in 2005. It divides post-Vatican II Catholics—half of all Catholics today—into three groups: post-Vatican II Catholics (born 1941–1960), Generation X Catholics (1961–1978), and millennials (1979–1987).⁸

5. *University of North Carolina Study (UNC 2005)*

Finally, we will draw on a wide study of youth and religion conducted by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and published in 2005.⁹ The study focused on teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17. Some 3,370 teenagers and one of their parents were surveyed, and an additional 267 in-depth interviews were conducted through randomly generated telephone numbers, making this an extremely useful instrument.

A Diminished Catholic Identity

How might the religious identity of young adult Catholics in the United States be characterized today? Many have observed that they share the subjective approach of their non-Catholic peers toward religious affiliation. The bonds that tie them to the institutional Church have slipped considerably. Richard Gaillardetz reports that from his experience of speaking at dozens of pastoral events over the last 15 years, two issues surface repeatedly.

⁷ Davidson and Hoge, "Catholics After the Scandal: A New Study's Major Findings," *Commonweal* 131/20 (Nov. 19, 2004) 13–19.

⁸ See "Survey of U.S. Catholics," *National Catholic Reporter* 41/42 (September 30, 2005) 9–24; also ncronline.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2005d/101405/101405n.htm.

⁹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

1. the large numbers of young Catholics who have only a very thin sense of their Catholic identity and
2. a small but significant percentage of Catholics who seem, to the outside observer, obsessed with their Catholic identity and seek to define it in ways that alienate many pastoral ministers.¹⁰

Gaillardetz identifies the two different groups we noted in the Introduction, a larger group with a diminished sense of Catholic identity, and a smaller but significant group vitally interested in what it means to be Catholic.

Perhaps even more disturbing is the UNC study. The researchers found that U.S. Catholic teenagers are *behind* their Protestant peers—sometimes by as much as 25 percentage points—when measured by many standards of religious belief, practice, experiences, and commitments. Indeed, many of them are “living far outside of official Church norms defining true Catholic faithfulness.”¹¹

Only 10 percent of Catholic teenagers said religion was “extremely important” in shaping their daily lives, compared to 20 percent of mainline Protestants, 29 percent of conservative Protestants, and 31 percent of black Protestant teens. Forty percent of Catholic teens said that they had never attended any parish religious education programs, versus 19 percent of mainline, 13 percent of conservative, and 12 percent of black Protestants. In terms of attending religious services, 40 percent of Catholic teens attended once a week—slightly below mainline and black Protestant teens, but 15 percent lower than conservative Protestant teens. Only 6 percent of Catholic teens said they attended religious services more than once a week.¹²

A Diminished Institutional Identity

Hoge and his associates described young adult Catholics as comfortable with the Church’s basic doctrines, sacramental tradition, and concern for the poor. At the same time these young Catholics lack a strong commitment to the Church and are less familiar with the ecclesial dimensions

¹⁰ Richard Gaillardetz, “Apologetics, Evangelization and Ecumenism Today,” *Origins* 35/1 (2005) 9.

¹¹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 194.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37–53.

of their faith.¹³ The gap between what the Church teaches and what Catholics actually believe and do, the researchers noted, revealed that “a more serious issue is the decline in the centrality of Catholic institutional identity. That is, it matters less to large numbers of young adult Catholics if they are Catholic in any institutional or communal sense.”¹⁴ Indeed a significant number no longer see the Catholic Church as unique, the pope as necessary, or the tradition as a source of objective truth (221). Many said that they can be good Catholics without going to Mass (224).

The NCR survey bears this out, reporting that 76 percent of Catholics think that you can be a good Catholic without going to church every Sunday (Table 1); for Generation X and millennials, the percentages are even higher—76 and 95 percent respectively (Table 3). Only 26 percent of the post-Vatican II sample and 15 percent of the millennials reported attending Mass weekly or more (Table 10). A report from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate in Washington (CARA) notes that only 21 percent of young adults attend Mass every week or more.¹⁵

While Hoge et al., found that young adult Catholics like being Catholic, their Catholicism seems to be accidental to their relationship with Christ. The largest group in their sample consisted of young adults “all but indistinguishable from mainline Protestants.” Many viewed the Church simply as another denomination or human institution. They considered being a Catholic an accident of birth or a personal preference, and viewed other churches as equally legitimate (223). They saw little connection between religion and spirituality (224). Few participated in small faith communities in their parishes and their social networks weren’t primarily Catholic (228). In other words, being Catholic was not expressed by being part of the Catholic community. The communal dimension of Catholicism, noted earlier as a distinctive of Catholic identity, was largely missing.

A Selective Approach to Authority

Another problem is that the Church itself has little authority for many young adult Catholics. They are “less convinced that the Church’s rules are God’s rules, less convinced that the Church’s structures are divinely

¹³ Hoge, *Young Adult Catholics*, 220–21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 223; see chapter 2 for a review of past research.

¹⁵ Bryan T. Froehle and Mary L. Gautier, *Catholicism USA: A Portrait of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 23.

ordained or necessary, and more inclined to make choices for themselves” (225). They are selective in their approach to Church teachings; what is true is what is true for the individual (223). The Church has little credibility in the area of sexuality; those interviewed repeatedly mentioned birth control, homosexuality, limitations on women’s role in the Church, and teachings against married and women priests as the most problematic (231). The NCR survey said that 59 percent of post-Vatican II Catholics and 89 percent of millennials agreed that one can be a good Catholic without accepting the Church’s opposition to abortion (Table 6).

Most of the undergraduates I teach have little patience with what they see as the official Church’s negative attitude toward sexuality; that is, issuing black-and-white condemnations rather than articulating positive values. Many are not able to understand the Church’s attitude toward homosexuals and see them as marginalized. Virtually all of them have grown up with gay friends and cannot understand why the Church cannot reevaluate its teaching in this area since it recognizes that homosexuality is a condition not a choice. They feel that homosexuals have the right to express their love physically and do not see recognizing gay marriages as undermining the institution of marriage. The refusal to support even domestic partnership seems nothing more than prejudice to them.

For many young adult Catholics, being religious is reduced to ethics. Although they consider social justice central to being Catholic, their sense of social justice has little to do with the Church’s social teaching. “While they see social justice as core to Catholic identity, most individuals interpret this to mean approaching social problems with acts of charity.” Being religious means simply being a good person. If they saw more clearly the connection between social justice and a *specifically Catholic identity*, including its social doctrine, they might be more concerned with structural problems, institutions, and power, the Hoge report argued. (224).

Leaving the Catholic Church?

A final example of a decreased institutional loyalty is the diminishing number of Catholics who say that they would never leave the Church. Hoge’s *Young Adult Catholics* was optimistic on this issue. He said that of those his researchers interviewed, most have remained Catholic, including the Latinos. Of the 6 percent of non-Latinos and 8 percent of Latinos interviewed who had formally joined other churches, half of the

Latino sample had returned to the Catholic Church.¹⁶ Reviewing their research, Peter Steinfels judges it to be “slightly rosier than the reality” because interviews were conducted only with those who had been confirmed. He notes that because only about 60–70 percent of non-Latino youth and 30–40 percent of Latinos were confirmed during the 1980s and 1990s, “the young adults of this study do not represent all current young adult Catholics.”¹⁷

In the Notre Dame study of generational differences among Catholics, 81 percent said that the Catholic Church is “very important to me personally” and 71 percent said that they would never leave the Catholic Church.¹⁸ But the *NCR* survey showed a considerable drop in those who said they would never leave: 69 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics, 58 percent of Vatican II Catholics, 53 percent of those in Generation X and only 33 percent of the millennials (Table 3). And the number of committed Catholics steadily continues to decline. Hoge said of the *NCR* results, “Nobody should conclude that in 20 or 40 years, no Catholics will be in the high-commitment category, since church involvement typically increases from the young adult years to the middle adult years. The most reasonable prediction is that in the future the overall level will continue to sag, as it has recently.”¹⁹

Today there are many who have left the Catholic Church and joined other churches. This is something relatively new. We once said, “Once a Catholic, always a Catholic.” Not so any more. The reasons people leave are many. Some, the object of proselytizing efforts by evangelical Christians, claim to have discovered a personal relationship with Jesus for the first time. Some of the seeker megachurches such as Willow Creek near Chicago, claim to have more than 60 percent former Catholics among their ranks. A significant number of Hispanic Catholics have joined evangelical churches, too.

Some Catholics have left after running afoul of the Church’s discipline or because of impatience with what they saw as the Church’s inability to change, particularly in its teaching against married and women priests. I’ve met a number of Catholics who left because of abuses of Church authority. In one case, a woman whose book on preaching had been accepted by a Catholic press was told by a priest that she could not say

¹⁶ Hoge, *Young Adult Catholics*, 44–46.

¹⁷ Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003) 209.

¹⁸ Davidson and Hoge, “Catholics After the Scandal,” 17–18.

¹⁹ Hoge, “Attitudes of Catholics Highly Committed to the Church,” *NCR* Survey.

“when we preach” because she was a layperson and, therefore, not allowed to preach (he wasn’t completely accurate).

Others who leave are Catholics in second marriages. Or, perhaps they married a non-Catholic and joined a Protestant church. Some leave for seemingly frivolous reasons, such as not being allowed to hold their marriage ceremony in a garden.

Many Protestant seminaries or divinity schools have large numbers of former Catholics, particularly Catholic women, who are seeking ordination. In California at least two Episcopalian bishops are former Catholics, and of the Catholic students or colleagues I’ve known in my years teaching in Los Angeles, at least five have become Episcopalian priests.

Contributing Factors

What contributes to this diminished sense of Catholic identity? Drawing on the Hoge study and other authors, we can point to a number of factors.

Religious Individualism

The pervasive religious individualism of postmodern American culture has often been noted. Robert Neelly Bellah attributes it to the dominance of Protestantism in the national culture of the United States, citing G. K. Chesterton’s remark that “in America, even the Catholics are Protestant.”²⁰ Bellah sees a connection between Protestantism and the utilitarian and expressive individualism so characteristic of the American cultural code. One cause of this was the role played in early American history by dissenting Protestants—sectarians persecuted by established churches in the old country who consequently exalted freedom of conscience against any political, hierocratic, or patriarchal power. As a result, the individual conscience, unbalanced by any sense for the whole or the common good, became absolutely sacred in matters of belief.

In addition, certain central Protestant beliefs strengthened that individualism. First, Bellah argues that Protestant suspicion of the Catholic

²⁰ Robert Neelly Bellah, “Religion and the Shape of National Culture,” *America* 181/3 (1999) 10.

sense for the sacred in the world led Calvin to so emphasize the radical transcendence of God that, in effect, God was pushed out of the world. This opened the door to an atheistic naturalism. With God absent from a deterministically conceived physical universe, the self emerged as autonomous.

Second, he points to the almost exclusive American Protestant emphasis on salvation as based on a personal relationship with Jesus. This results in the privatization of piety and a Gnostic divinization of the self. A view that “if I’m all right with Jesus, then I don’t need the church,” can easily progress to what he calls “Sheila-ism,” a name Bellah gives to the “religion” of Sheila Larson, a young woman profiled in his *Habits of the Heart* who described her faith as “just my own little voice.”²¹ There lies the problem. Without mediators between the individual and his or her idea of God—mediators to which one might be answerable, whether church, sacrament, canonical discipline, or doctrinal tradition—the individual emerges as autonomous.

This radical individualism can be seen in what Robert Wuthnow describes as the breakdown of communities because of the “loose connections” and “porous institutions” typical of our culture. The result is that there is little in the way of community to hold individuals together.²² Wade Clark Roof observes that many find their experience of the sacred outside religious institutions; their approach to religion is highly subjective, exalting experience at the expense of religious authority.²³

Similarly, Meredith McGuire describes the “spiritual autonomy” of many contemporary believers who “feel free to choose components of their individual faith and practice, combining elements of their official religious traditions with other culturally available elements.”²⁴ These Catholics are often called “cafeteria Catholics.” Typical would be the following from Sarah Michelle Gellar, star of television’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: “I consider myself a spiritual person. I believe in an idea of God, although it’s my own personal idea. I find most religions interesting,

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11–12 at 12.

²² Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America’s Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²³ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); also his *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journey of the Baby Boomer Generation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993).

²⁴ Meredith B. McGuire, “Mapping Contemporary American Spirituality: A Sociological Perspective,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 5/1 (1997) 4.

and I've been to every kind of denomination: Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist. I've taken bits from everything and customized it."²⁵

Post-Vatican II Catholics are the most individualistic, according to Andrea Williams and Davidson. "Most members of this age group placed great emphasis on having a personal relationship with God and did not see the Church as an essential component of their faith."²⁶ This seems to be an increasing trend. Davidson said that we should expect a growing number of young adults who will have a more individualistic view of their relationship with God and attach much less importance to the institutional Church.²⁷

The UNC study said that "religious languages and vocabularies of commitment, duty, faithfulness, obedience, calling, obligation, accountability, and ties to the past are nearly completely absent from the discourse of U.S. teenagers. Instead, religion is presumed to be something that individuals choose and must reaffirm for themselves based on their present and ongoing personal felt needs and preferences."²⁸

What emerges is what the authors call "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." They call this the de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers, though they suggest that it may well be "the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer capitalist society."²⁹ Its creed would look something like this:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.³⁰

²⁵ *Christianity Today* (July 8, 2002) 10.

²⁶ Andrea Williams and Davidson, "Catholic Conceptions of Faith: A Generational Analysis" *Sociology of Religion* 57/3 (Fall 1996) 285.

²⁷ *National Catholic Reporter* (September 30, 2005) 21.

²⁸ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 143–44.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 262.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 162–63.

A Culture of Voluntarism

The religious individualism typical of American culture results in a religious voluntarism. As with so many people in postmodern culture, for many young Catholics being Catholic “is less a matter of core identity and more a matter of personal choice.”³¹ Their religious identities are self-constructed. Drawing on “America’s free-market religious economy,” they seek spiritual sustenance from a diversity of sources, not all of them Catholic. They refer to popular writers such as M. Scott Peck, Joseph Campbell, Laura Schlessinger, and James Dobson as often as they do to Catholic authors such as Henri Nouwen and Thomas Merton (163). They differ from Catholics of another generation in terms of their involvement in the Church’s life, their selective attitude toward authority, their tendency to reduce being religious to ethics, and their diminished familiarity with the tradition and its core narratives.

Hoge and his colleagues argue that the cognitive dissonance between what the official Church teaches and what they personally accept doesn’t really create a problem for most young adults Catholics. Since they appropriate being Catholic on their own terms, they feel no obligation to leave the Church when they disagree with its teachings (226).

Furthermore, few have any desire to share their faith with others (228). As John Haughey has observed, Catholic students, in contrast to many non-Catholic Christian students, “are very slow to make faith statements or statements about a personal relationship with Christ, even though Pope John Paul II has insisted that a personal, even intimate relationship with Christ should be the aim of our programs of catechesis in the church.”³² Various explanations are offered for this Catholic reticence, including the minority status of their immigrant Catholic ancestors in a Protestant culture; a “live and let live” attitude, arising out of an acceptance of American pluralism; a distaste for the “in-your-face” evangelism of some evangelicals or sectarian Christians; or the fact that so many contemporary Catholics are unable to explain or defend their faith when challenged.³³ It is also true that few Catholic theologians give a high priority to evangelization today.

³¹ Hoge, *Young Adult Catholics*, 224–25.

³² See John C. Haughey, “Why Are Catholics Slow to Profess Their Faith? Church-ianity and Christ-ianity,” *America* 190/18 (2004) 8–9.

³³ See Martin Pabble, “Why Don’t Catholics Share Their Faith,” *America* 193/7 (2005) 12.

One of the surprising results of the NCR survey was that a higher number of pre-Vatican II Catholics—59 percent, versus 47 percent for millennial Catholics—reported that they “cannot explain faith to others” (Table 13). Still religious illiteracy appears to be rather widespread; 49 percent of Catholics agreed that they often cannot explain their faith to others.³⁴

Loss of the Catholic Subculture

William Portier, professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Dayton, agrees that Catholic identity has become a key issue. But he differs with those who simply classify today’s young Catholics as “post-Vatican II Catholics,” thus suggesting that the council itself contributed to their diminished Catholic identity,³⁵ or with sociologists like Hoge and colleagues who focus more on contemporary American pluralism. Portier argues that it makes more sense to tell the story of young adult Catholics today from the perspective of the dissolution of the American Catholic subculture.³⁶ Similarly, Gaillardetz argues that Catholics under age 40 live in a world characterized, “not by the suffocating insularity and rigidity of immigrant Catholicism, but by the disorienting free fall of postmodern religious pluralism.”³⁷

The immigrant Catholic subculture was once vast and all-embracing. Those born after 1965 have little sense of how completely American Catholics were shaped by it. Charles Morris, in his marvelous book *American Catholic*, charts the way immigrant Catholics and their leaders chose the path of separatism after finding themselves in a hostile Protestant culture. Under the firm direction of their mostly Irish bishops and priests, the American Church became the most “Roman” of the national churches.³⁸ American Catholics, fiercely loyal to the pope and generous in supplying the Church with priests, nuns, and brothers, were often anti-intellectual. As late as the fifties, critics like Msgr. John Tracy Ellis

³⁴ James Davidson, “Challenging Assumptions About Young Catholics,” *National Catholic Reporter* (September 30, 2005) 22.

³⁵ Davidson, *The Search for Common Ground*, Chapter 1.

³⁶ William L. Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” *Communio* 31 (Spring 2004) 49–50.

³⁷ Gaillardetz, “Apolgetics, Evangelization and Ecumenism Today,” 10.

³⁸ Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America’s Most Powerful Church* (New York: Times Books, 1997) 134.

and Thomas O’Dea were asking why American Catholic scholarship was so undistinguished.³⁹

Catholic life centered on the local parish and young Catholics were insulated from the surrounding culture through a vast network of Catholic institutions, religious practices, and relationships. The system of parochial education promoted Catholicism as a complete way of life, from grade schools through colleges and universities, for the few that went that far. Most Catholics married other Catholics. They had a rich devotional life that included weekly confession, prayer, devotion to the Eucharist expressed through the Mass, novenas, and Benediction, as well as a panoply of Marian devotions.⁴⁰ In Morris’ words, they “shared an outlook on the world that was definably ‘American Catholic’—disciplined, rule-bound, loyal to church and country, unrebelling, but upwardly mobile and achievement-oriented.”⁴¹

The American Catholic Church was characterized by what David O’Brien has called the “immigrant style.”⁴² It was certainly distinctive. As Garry Wills describes it so poignantly in his essay, “Memories of a Catholic Boyhood”:

We grew up different, there were some places we went, and others did not—into the confessional box, for instance . . . The habits of childhood are tenacious, and Catholicism was first experienced by us as a vast set of intermeshed childhood habits—prayers offered, heads ducked in unison, crossings, chants, christenings, grace at meals; beads, altar, incense, candles; nuns in the classroom, alternately too sweet and too severe, priests garbed black on the street and brilliant at the altar; churches lit and darkened, clothed and stripped, to the rhythm of liturgical recurrences. . . . We spoke a different language from the rest of men—not only the actual Latin memorized when we learned to “serve Mass” as altar boys. We also had odd bits of Latinized English that were not part of other six year olds’ vocabulary, words like “contrition” or “transubstantiation.”⁴³

³⁹ See John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholics and the Intellectual Life* (Chicago: Heritage Foundation, 1956); Thomas O’Dea, *American Catholic Dilemma: An Inquiry into the Intellectual Life* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958).

⁴⁰ See James M. O’Toole, ed., *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

⁴¹ Morris, *American Catholic*, 133.

⁴² David J. O’Brien, *Public Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996) xi.

⁴³ Garry Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs: Doubt, Prophecy, and Radical Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972) 15–16.

It was only after the Second World War, when thousands of returning Catholic veterans used the GI Bill to gain a university education that the largely blue-collar Catholic population began to enter the mainstream. No longer a socially excluded minority, Catholics soon took their place among the best-educated groups in the United States, with a high number entering white-collar professions. But their new mainstream status and affluence contributed to the weakening of U.S. Catholic identity and practice in the second half of the twentieth century.⁴⁴

For Portier, the dissolution of the subculture was a defining event for twentieth-century American Catholicism, one young people experienced directly. With Catholics now living in the suburbs rather than in traditional urban areas, often with ethnic parishes; fewer going to Catholic schools; more marrying non-Catholics; and Catholic colleges and universities struggling to preserve their religious identity, remaining Catholic becomes increasingly a matter of choice.⁴⁵

A Crisis of Credibility

Andrew Greeley argues that a revolution took place in the United States in the years after the Second Vatican Council. Disillusioned by the inability of the bishops to effectively implement the small reforms made by the council as well as by Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical on birth control, Catholics simply stopped listening when Church authorities, expecting blind obedience, attempted to teach on sexuality and other matters requiring acceptance. It was a crisis of credibility. The old wineskins burst, to appropriate Greeley's metaphor.⁴⁶

Greeley also says that Catholics choose to be Catholics on their own terms, though he is more optimistic about young Catholics maintaining a Catholic identity or Catholic imagination.⁴⁷ Although most of them reject the sexual ethic of the Church and attend Mass infrequently, the strongest components of their Catholic identity are sacramental, communal, and Marian, and almost half think that the pope is essential.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 215.

⁴⁵ Portier, "Here Come the Evangelical Catholics," 54.

⁴⁶ See Greeley, *The Catholic Revolution: New Wine, Old Wineskins, and the Second Vatican Council* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 192.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 110–13.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 112–13.

Theological Illiteracy

The theological illiteracy and ignorance of the Catholic tradition that afflicts so many young Catholics may also be a factor in their diminished commitment to the Church. The Notre Dame study of generational differences among Catholics reported that 75 to 80 percent of those in the younger three generations said all major religions are equally good paths to ultimate truth. The study's authors suggest that the tolerance of young Catholics may reflect their attempt to find common ground in a pluralistic world and a Church that encourages openness to other faiths.⁴⁹

Several faculty respondents to the Notre Dame study pointed to an ignorance of Church doctrine as a problem. John Cavadini, chair of Notre Dame's theology department, wondered "how long you can hand down an affection for something when the substance of that very thing becomes fuzzier and fuzzier."⁵⁰ In an earlier article he noted that many students, even at elite Catholic colleges and universities, were ignorant of the basic terminology of the faith; accordingly, he called for "a renewed pedagogy of the basics."⁵¹

Cathleen Kaveny, a professor of law and theology and a post-Vatican II Catholic herself, says that people of her generation didn't learn much doctrine; the catechesis they received "was on engaging our emotions, not on challenging our intellects." With the loss of the coherent Catholic culture of the pre-Vatican II Church, they "do not have the Catholic-in-our-bones sensibilities that characterizes both liberals and conservatives of earlier generations."⁵² Mark Poorman, vice president for student affairs at Notre Dame, notes that many of the Catholic students he meets "seem ignorant of the basic theological distinctions, including differences among Christian traditions and between Christianity and other religions; even those who can name the sacraments often cannot articulate a sacramental theology—a central distinguishing tenet of Catholic belief." Interestingly enough, he also observed a strong interest in canon law, perhaps reflecting the need for clarity, concreteness, and boundaries.⁵³

⁴⁹ Davidson and Hoge, "Catholics After the Scandal," 17–18.

⁵⁰ John C. Cavadini, "Many Truths? Coming to Terms with Pluralism," *Commonweal* 131/20 (November 19, 2004) 22.

⁵¹ Cavadini, "Ignorant Catholics: The Alarming Void in Religious Education," *Commonweal* 131/7 (April 9, 2004) 13.

⁵² Cathleen Kaveny, "Young Catholics: When Labels Don't Fit," *Commonweal* 131/20 (November 19, 2004) 19.

⁵³ Mark L. Poorman, "A Sign of Hope: Young, Catholic and Curious," *Commonweal* 131/20 (November 19, 2004) 24; see also Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 204–05.

Michael Gallagher, an Irish Jesuit who has taught literature for twenty years and writes on faith, culture, and spirituality, speaks of “a whole new generation of baptized young adults whose formative experiences with religion or Church are so thin as to be almost non-existent.”⁵⁴

This lack of familiarity with their tradition is not a problem just for Catholic university students. The late Monika Hellwig pointed out that those enrolling in ministry programs and even in seminaries often did not have a solid catechetical formation, and even less, an accurate knowledge of common theological terms. “What is often lacking is a common language of the faith, a shared understanding of basic beliefs and practices, and a common memory of the lived experience of the longer tradition.” She recommended that there be some kind of remedial introduction to Catholic life, worship, and thought for the students.⁵⁵

My own sense after more than thirty years of teaching Catholic undergraduates is that most of them find it very difficult to give a coherent account of their faith. Most are unfamiliar with the history of the Church, its root metaphors, and its doctrines. Most would not be able to define incarnation, original sin, apostolic succession, or point to any of the principles of Catholic social teaching, though they might mention a “concern for the poor.” Unencumbered by a sense of guilt or sin, they do not generally think of Jesus as a savior or redeemer, and they are unfamiliar with the Catholic stories, whether biblical or traditional. Many could not name three sayings of Jesus, do not know the story of St. Paul or any of the saints, particularly contemporary ones, and are usually unfamiliar with Catholic devotions; a considerable number do not know how to pray the rosary. Many are clueless when asked by their Protestant classmates why they bless themselves with holy water, genuflect on entering the church, or pray to Mary. They are as individualistic as their non-Catholic peers, and often relativist in their sense for what is true.

However they do have traditional Catholic sensitivities. Their sense of worship is more liturgical than evangelical, even if they don’t go to mass every Sunday. Still, many would be hard pressed to explain what the Church understands by the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharist. As one student wrote in his essay on the Eucharist, “I had always thought of the Eucharist as a community meal that we all shared symbolizing

⁵⁴ Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998) 112.

⁵⁵ Monika Hellwig, “Theology at Catholic Universities: The Situation and its Possibilities,” *Origins* 32/43 (2003) 707.

the Last Supper." Although their anthropology is more positive, even optimistic, than the evangelical "total depravity" theology, the students tend toward an implicit rejection of the need for divine intervention for the forgiveness of sin. There is little sense of the reality of sin, or the damage done by what the tradition calls "original sin." As one student said in class, "I can be a good person by myself; why do I need the Church?"

Their imagination is more Catholic than dialectical; while they see God in nature and in other people, few could explain what sacrament or sacramentality means. Their God is kind and benevolent, there when needed, but not someone who enters into their lives with specific calls or demands. What the authors of the UNC study call "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" certainly fits.⁵⁶ These young Catholics have a sense of being part of a universal church and admire the pope as a leader and symbolic representative of Catholicism, but they have little sense of the precise meaning of his office and are almost totally ignorant of his teachings. Their hearts are more Catholic than their intellects.

Conclusion

This profile of young adult Catholics should raise some serious questions about the future vitality of the Catholic community in the United States. First, a diminished institutional commitment to the Catholic Church and to its teaching authority suggests that the Church may continue to lose both influence and members. The decreasing number of those who identify themselves as highly committed to the Church means that a considerable number may leave when faced with a disappointment or personal challenge. Fewer will commit themselves to the priesthood or religious life. And of course, without a strong cohort of strongly committed Catholics, the vitality of the local church will be diminished. At the same time, the fact that most young Catholics seem to have little desire to share their faith with others, in spite of the emphasis on evangelization in the writings of the recent popes, could have a negative impact on the Church's ability to carry out its mission.

The fact that many young Catholics seem to construct their own religious identities on the basis of personal preference also raises the question of the integrity of their Catholic faith and its ability to sustain them.

⁵⁶ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162–63; see above p. 11.

In his concluding homily at World Youth Day at Marienfeld, Cologne (August 2005) the newly elected Pope Benedict XVI cautioned against religion constructed on a "do-it-yourself" basis. Such religion "cannot ultimately help us. It may be comfortable, but at times of crisis we are left to ourselves." The pope pleaded, "Help people to discover the true star which points out the way to us: Jesus Christ!"⁵⁷

Nonetheless, many of the young people who came to take part in World Youth Day and meet the new pope came with an enthusiasm for their faith. Press reports captured something of their vitality and goodness as they endured the cold and damp cheerfully and slept in soggy fields.

Nor are they the only young Catholics whose goodness is evident to others. After years of teaching I continue to be amazed at their respect for each other, their ability to live with considerable diversity in values and lifestyle, and their openness to the new and the unfamiliar. Having grown up with gay friends, they are generally sympathetic to gay people and cannot understand the Vatican's unwillingness to recognize gay unions. As with other Catholics they often have problems with the way authority is exercised in the Church, which we will consider further in the concluding chapter.

The fact that many young Catholics are unfamiliar with the doctrinal tradition of their Church and unable to credibly explain their faith to others remains a problem. They are more ignorant than hostile or disinterested. Even those young Catholics whose affective or emotional attachment to their faith is strong need to become more familiar with the rich cultural and intellectual tradition of the Church. Catholicism is a way of life, not just another church. That way of life begins by cultivating a Catholic imagination.

⁵⁷ Benedict XVI, "Eucharist: Setting Transformations in Motion," *Origins* 35/12 (2005) 203.