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## Identity of Young Adult Catholics

Catholic identity is a constant preoccupation of church leaders. Today Catholic leaders are faced with questions from young people, such as “What is distinctive about being a Catholic, and is it important?” and “What does it mean to be a Catholic?” “Should we keep ourselves apart from other Christian groups?” Meanwhile, older Catholics responsible for the institutions ask “Will tomorrow’s Catholics support our beloved institutions?”

### **The problem of identity has changed**

The main problem of identity is not the same as it was a half century ago. Before the 1960s, Catholics in the United States were treated as being different by other Americans, and therefore a clear identity was given to Catholics from outside. They accepted that they were Catholics by virtue of birth. Obeying church teachings was a given. For them the problem was how to manage this unavoidable identity.

Later the social location of American Catholicism changed. By the 1960s, Catholics were achieving higher levels of education, moving to the suburbs, marrying non-Catholics at higher and higher rates, and, after the Second Vatican Council, acquiring new theological self-understandings. The Council removed the worst sore points separating Catholics from the Protestants. For example, it endorsed religious freedom. After President Kennedy and the Second Vatican Council, anti-Catholicism quickly faded.

By today the old boundary walls have largely fallen down. Catholics now live side-by-side with non-Catholics in the suburbs. The interfaith marriage rate is now somewhere above 45 percent. The percentage of college-going Catholics who attend Catholic colleges and universities is only about nine percent. In political races, it has become uninteresting to Americans whether candidates are Catholic or non-Catholic. Today’s Catholics are the most affluent and educated of any in American history. They are the most culturally aware, the best traveled, and the best integrated into all sectors of American society. In all of this there is much cause for rejoicing. There is also cause to prepare for a changed laity in the future.

Today, Catholics no longer feel so distinct, and they don’t feel a need to defend themselves. Now they feel freer to make their own choices—whether to be a loyal church-going Catholic, an ethnic Catholic, a private Catholic, a Catholic in name only, or none at all.

Now the problem of identity is “Why be Catholic?” “Are we distinctive in any important way?” “Who are we?” Some young people tell us, “There’s little difference” between Catholics and Protestants, or “There are many ways to God, and all are equally good.”

### **The Importance of young adults**

We need to take young adults very seriously. Let me make two points. First, young adults today are different from their elders. This fact gives rise to the question of whether they will change with age, so that they will come to resemble their elders a little later. If this is the prospect, young versus old differences today do not predict social change, but are merely different phases of the life cycle. Is it true that today’s liberals are tomorrow’s conservatives? Usually, ‘no’. According to the best research, it is not true in central life values.

Students of value change have distinguished two patterns, which for simplicity we will call “all shift” and “generational succession.” In “all shift,” everyone in the adult society shifts attitudes or behavior over a period of time, perhaps one or two decades, resulting in a comprehensive change in the society. An example is the rise in popularity of sport utility vehicles in the 1990s. Americans of all ages seemed to like the new vehicles, resulting in an across-the-board market shift.

The second type of change, “generational succession,” is different, in that nobody changed their mind. Rather, older people died and were replaced by younger adults who held different values and attitudes from their early years and who continued holding those values and attitudes unchanged throughout the life cycle. In this model, older people are more conservative

than young adults not because people become conservative with age but because the new generations entered at a different point. A good example is the present-day generational gap in attitudes toward premarital sex. Old and young Americans today are much different on this topic, but the best evidence is that older Americans did not change their attitudes as they aged, and younger Americans are not changing theirs either as they age. Rather, young Americans entered adulthood with different attitudes former early in their lives.

This second model, "generational succession," best matches current research on basic values, social commitments, and worldviews, and it should guide our thinking about young adult Catholics. It raises the question of why the young adults were different in the first place? Why isn't there continuity across generations? Here I need to explain the concept "impressionable years." In the typical life cycle in modern society, individuals acquire their most basic worldviews and values at an early age. The exact years are impossible to specify, but estimates range from 10 to 20 years of age at the young end to 15 to 25 years of age at the old end. As a rough guess, let us adopt 12 to 22. Values formed during this decade will be largely determinative for the entire life cycle. There will be exceptions, as when certain individuals have radical conversions of one type or other, or when vivid life experiences bring a *metanoia*.

The "generation succession" model fits most values, but it does not fit the data on Mass attendance. Mass attendance is greatly influenced by social influences and family life, and that complicates the situation. Mass attendance is low for persons in their 20s, but it increases after marriage, parenthood, and settling into a community, as evidenced by buying a house. This is not to say that generational succession is not present—it still is, but it is eclipsed in the data by changes in attendance as adults get older.

The second point I need to make is that young adults today are the carriers of social and cultural change. This has its trivial side, as we watch young adults shift musical tastes from decade to decade. But it also has a profound side, as we remember that political revolutions in the last century have been initiated and borne mostly by educated young adults. This has been clear in the Russian and Chinese revolutions, in the fall of Communism, and in the unrest of the Middle East. The prototypical agent of social change has been the college student, best exemplified in the novel and Broadway show 'Les Miserables', in which the cadre of young student revolutionaries was pitted in street warfare against the mercenaries of the old regime. Another pertinent example is the Tiananmen Square uprising in Beijing in 1989, in which university students urging more democracy in China held a massive takeover of Tiananmen Square in the middle of the city, even erecting a papier-mâché version of a statue of liberty. Where did the students get their revolutionary ideas? It was from their university educations at home and abroad.

My point is this: liberal college education influences American youth in the direction of individualistic, democratic values. Apparently Catholic parents and leaders see this influence as a good thing, or at least as acceptable. In institutional planning in American Catholicism we should prepare for this, by expecting that educated young adults will increasingly want more lay input in church governance and more accountability of church leaders to the laity.

Today's young adults are the best educated, most culturally aware, best traveled, and most autonomous in making their life decisions, of any in American history. Young adults will not be receptive to arguments about Catholic obligations or duties; they will feel that decisions about their lives are their own. The future will not be like the past, and we should prepare for it.

### **How young adults have changed**

We can trace how young adults change, by using survey data. Mass attendance (weekly or more often) of young adult Catholics dropped from 37 percent in 1972-1974 to 19 percent in 2002. For non-Catholics there was little change over this time, with figures hovering around 20 percent. The belief that homosexuality is always or almost always wrong dropped from 68 percent in 1972-1974 to 42 percent in 2002. Belief that premarital sex is wrong dropped from 29 percent in 1972-1974 to 19 percent in 2002. The belief that women should stay in the home and let men run the country dropped from 20 percent in 1972-1974 to 10 percent in the late 1990s.

In general Catholic young adults resembled non-Catholic young adults in these trends. This is because Catholics are more and more in contact with non-Catholics, less segregated off in separate schools or neighbourhoods.

### **How are young adult Catholics different from their elders?**

We have good survey data on how young adult Catholics differ from their elders. The uniqueness of these young adult Catholics can be described in three statements:

#### *1. Young adult Catholics uphold greater individual authority in religious and moral decisions.*

Table 1 includes five measures of feelings about life decisions. The first item asks if Catholics need to obey church teachings even if they disagree with them. Twenty-six percent of the young adults said 'yes'. But the older Pre-Vatican II Catholics held a different view; 42 percent said 'yes'. The young adults were a few points higher than the Vatican II adults (26 percent compared with 20 percent), and the reason is unclear.

In the middle of the table are two statements about making individual religious decisions. The first says that individuals should make religious decisions on their own, and the young adults are seen to be different from the pre-Vatican II Catholics. The Vatican II Catholics (middle group) agree with the young adults. The second item says that if you believe in God, it doesn't really matter to which religion you belong. Again the young adults and middle-age adults agree with each other, and they agree with the statement more than the older Pre-Vatican adults.

The bottom of Table 1 contains four questions about moral questions on sexual behavior. As in the rest of Table 1, the most important gap is between the first two groups and the third. The gap between the youngest and oldest groups is 32 points on homosexual acts, 18 points on abortion, 42 points on pre-marital sex, and 15 points on birth control.

**Table 1. National Sample of American Catholics 2003**

<i>Survey questions (below):</i>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Young Adults 13-29 years old</b>	<b>Vatican II 40-62 years old</b>	<b>Pre-Vatican II 63+ years old</b>
<b>Please tell me which <u>one</u> of these statements comes <u>closer</u> to the way you think: (in percentage terms)</b>				
Catholics must obey church teachings even if they disagree with them.	26	26	20	42
Catholics must do what they think is right even when it doesn't agree with church teaching.	69	70	76	49
Don't know or refused.	5	4	4	9
Individuals should seek out religious truth for themselves and not automatically conform to the doctrines of any church. (percentage who agree)	76	80	81	54
If you believe in God, it doesn't really matter which religion you belong to. (percentage who agree)	86	88	88	76
<b>In your opinion, are the following behaviours always morally wrong? (percentage "always morally wrong")</b>				
Engage in homosexual acts.	44	37	40	69
Choose to terminate a pregnancy by having an abortion.	39	37	34	55
Engage in pre-marital sex.	30	22	25	64
Use condoms or birth control pills to prevent pregnancy.	11	10	8	25

*2. Young adult Catholics want more influence of laity in institutional decision-making.*

Young adults want lay people to have more say in choosing parish priests, and they want better financial reporting at all levels. The gaps between young adults and pre-Vatican Catholics are only moderately great; the greatest is on whether lay people should have a say in selecting the parish priest--a gap of 25 points.

*3. Young adult Catholics are less invested in the institutional Catholic Church.*

Young adult Catholics are less active in the institutional church, and they are less emotionally invested in it. Young adults attend Mass, receive Communion, and go to private confession with a priest much less than older Catholics.

This raises a basic question. Earlier, I said that young adult Catholics want more lay input in church governance and more accountability of leaders to the laity. Will today's young adults be committed enough to the institutional Church in the future to give their energies to reform movements? Or will they be only indifferently involved in the Church, taking the attitude that "my faith is in God, not in the Church, and what the church leaders do doesn't matter to me"? I would guess: it will be some of each. All we can say for certain is that the current young adult generation will be less involved in the Church than their parents.

**The structure of personal identity**

"Identity" is a complex concept, similar in meaning to "self-concept."<sup>1</sup> Two types need to be distinguished: objective identity and subjective identity. Young adults may be identified objectively as Catholic because of their family upbringing, but they may not feel Catholic and may not think it is at all important. They may say, "Well, I was raised and baptized Catholic and so I guess I'm a Catholic, but now I don't practice and I don't even feel Catholic." Another name for this distinction is "imposed identity" versus "chosen identity." Our concern here, and the concern of Catholic institutional leaders, is subjective identity.

### *The psychology of identity*

I need to explain here that the identity of an individual person is a structure of separate elements, arranged more or less hierarchically. Research on identity shows that any element of personal identity, for example, being an engineer, being Republican, being Irish-American, or being Catholic, will become strong or weak depending on how it serves the person's overall life goals. Accepting or rejecting portions of one's identity is not done easily or quickly, but research shows that to strengthen any element of one's identity—for example, being Catholic—that element must genuinely serve the person's basic values. For example, the importance of attending Mass to any person will depend, over time, on how doing so serves that person's most basic needs. The same is true of self-identification as a Catholic. If describing oneself as a Catholic fails to serve one's basic needs, or if there are blockages, the person will slowly withdraw emotional investment from Catholic self-identification, and it will sink to a lower level in personal identity, where it will then have less influence on his or her life decisions. Shifts such as this in the importance of identity elements take time. The process of building Catholic identity should be seen as akin to making a friend or falling in love—it requires time and it depends on a succession of experiences.

### *Research on Catholic identity*

Our research group at Catholic University has studied Catholic identity in this new situation. Our conclusions are, first, that most Catholics continue to identify themselves as being Catholic, and few leave. People remain Catholic. But church involvement is decreasing from decade to decade. That is, church involvement is more at risk than self-identity as Catholic.

A second conclusion is Catholic identity depends on ethnic and family factors much more than is the case with mainline Protestant identity. In that respect Catholics are similar to American Jews, whose Jewish identity does not depend crucially on religious beliefs. Catholics remain Catholic, even if they are unhappy or unconvinced of Catholic teachings. One research study spoke of “Catholic glue,” indicating that Catholics seldom leave. They may be alienated and inactive, but they remain Catholic. Catholicism is not becoming just another denomination in mainline Protestantism, as some people have said. The fear of “Protestantization,” which some people feel, is overdone.

It is a long-term sociological finding that any cultural group undergoing rapid change, especially change due to pressures from outside, will divide into parties. The parties will be arrayed according to how to respond to the new outside pressures. The most conservative party will totally reject everything it sees as new, modern, and alien. The most liberal party, on the other end, will accept most of the new and will abandon large parts of the tradition. Other parties will fall between them. This has happened to most cultural-religious groups. For example, before the French Revolution in Europe, Judaism was only what we now call Orthodox Judaism, but in the last 225 years it has split into three or four denominations. Catholicism has not split in this way, but parties of this character have grown up within it, and they are battling now.

There is a practical lesson here. In a time of social change, some selections and decisions are unavoidable. Catholicism is broad and variegated. Its history contains doctrines, devotions, charismatic leaders, reformers, and mystics. Some of the history is inspiring and some is not. Every Catholic needs to make some selections as to what is the core and the essence, and what is not. We wondered how today's Catholics make decisions about core and non-core issues.

In several surveys we asked Catholic laypersons what they think is really essential about being Catholic and what is unessential or even optional. Here is our question in 2005: “As a Catholic, how important is each of the following to you? Would you say very important, somewhat important, or not important at all?” We asked about 12 elements of Catholicism. Tied for first place are “Helping the poor” and “Belief in Jesus' resurrection from the dead.” In third place is “The sacraments, such as the Eucharist,” and closely following is “The Catholic Church's teachings about Mary as the Mother of God.”

In last place was “A celibate male clergy,” followed by “The Catholic Church's teachings that oppose the death penalty” and “The teaching authority claimed by the Vatican.” These findings were similar to findings in a study in 1999.

A large study was done in 1997, of Catholics 20-39 years old. See Table 2. In every assessment, Catholic laity reported that sacraments and charity toward the poor were central to their understanding of the essence of Catholicism. Devotion to Mary the Mother of God was almost as central. Creedal beliefs such as Jesus' resurrection were central. By contrast, other elements came out consistently low: specific moral teachings about the death penalty and abortion, and specific church rules, for example, requiring personal confession or saying that only celibate men could be priests.

Here we have laypersons' views of what really matters and what is optional. The top of this chart could be called the core, and the bottom, the periphery. One implication is that the items near the bottom are not very central, and in some cases are meaningful instrumentally, that is, how do they serve or hinder the core? Let me give you another example. I was recently in a debate in a Protestant church over whether to overhaul the old pipe organ or to buy a new electronic organ. The debate became heated and threatened to hurt congregational life. It seems to me that whether one has a pipe organ or electronic organ, or any organ at all, was not something Jesus talked about, or the Bible talked about. It is an instrumental decision, that is, what serves best? (This example is awkward, in that in the case of the organ it is instrumental in two senses.) Another example would be the debate over altar rails. Jesus didn't talk about altar rails. The main consideration should be, what helps

the Church best to carry out its mission? But to some people the pipe organ or altar rail was apparently a core commitment in itself, to be defended at all cost.

In general, the lower an item is in Figure 1, the more instrumental it would be, and thus more available to periodic re-evaluation to see if it is really serving the core. Would-be church reformers need to keep their eyes at the bottom of the chart, not at the middle or top.

**Table 2. How essential is each of these elements to your vision of what the Catholic faith is? (percentage saying “essential to faith”) Catholics 20-39 years of age, 1997.**

Belief that God is in the sacraments	65
Charitable efforts toward helping the poor	58
Belief that Christ is really present in the Eucharist	58
Devotion to Mary the Mother of God	53
Belief that God is present in a special way in the poor	52
Having religious orders of priests, sisters, brothers and monks	48
The necessity of having a Pope	48
Being a universal church throughout the world	45
Efforts toward eliminating the social causes of poverty, such as unequal wages and discrimination	42
The teaching that Christ established the authority of the bishops by choosing Peter	42
Having a regular daily prayer life	41
Devotion to saints	41
The obligation to attend mass once a week	37
Private confession to a priest	32
Teachings which oppose abortion	31
Belief that priests must be celibate	27
Teachings which oppose the death penalty	22
Belief that only men can be priests	17
The Church’s traditional support of the right of workers to unionise	14

Of course, studying 12 elements in this way is not enough. Researchers need to assess the centrality of many different elements of the faith and church. They would need to include financial practices, accountability, hiring practices, and so on.

#### *What is Inspiring?*

At Catholic University we also carried out an experimental study to help clarify Catholic identity of young adults. We surveyed a sample of 49 local Catholics from 20 to 39 years old—but it was not a random sample. The questionnaire said, “Here are several elements of Catholicism. Some are old and some are new. Some are central, while others are not. Please tell us if any of them are sources of pride or inspiration to you. Which of these give you pride in being a Catholic today?” We asked them to rate 18 facets of Catholicism which are unique, or near-unique, for example, “Catholicism is the oldest Christian religion,” “Devotion to Mary the Mother of God,” and “Catholics have private confession to a priest.”

Which are the most inspiring? Number one, “Devotion to Mary the Mother of God.” Number two, “Catholics believe in the Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ.” Number three, “Offers sacraments every week.” Number four, “Has a Pope who speaks to world leaders, espousing Christian values and ideals.” Here is information to build on. Our premise is that tomorrow’s Catholic identity will be built on unique elements of Catholicism which are felt to be meaningful.

What we did was only an experimental study, and we need a reliable national sample later, but this begins to tell us what are the raw materials for Christian identity among young adults.

As another twist, we asked “Who are the two most inspiring Catholics in all of Church history?” We didn’t know what to expect. Two persons turned out to be tied for first place: Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II. In third place was St. Francis of Assisi. These are the heroes of the faith for young adults. The purpose of this research was to identify portions of the Catholic faith which are, first, unique to Catholicism, and second, inspiring. They help us identify resources for the Catholic identity of the next generation.

Protestants have been studying denominational identity and have done research on the problem. Protestant denominations have a greater identity problem than the Catholic Church in America. The Protestant researchers point out the importance of identifying the specific denominational narrative and repeating it over and over in many ways. It provides answer to the question “Who were we, who are we, and who are we to become?”

### *Boundaries of Catholic Identity*

A second question pertaining to Catholic identity is that of boundaries around the faith. All religions need boundaries. In official church teachings the boundaries are specified, but we wanted to know what boundaries laypersons perceive. The basic issue here is tolerance of other religions or even a belief in relativism—that is, that all religions are basically the same and all are okay. In a 2003 nationwide survey we put four questions to a random sample of Catholic laypersons.

The first statement was “The Catholic religion contains a greater share of the truth than other religions do.” Fifty-three percent agreed. The second is the obverse: “The Catholic religion has no more spiritual truth than other major religions.” Fifty-two percent agreed. It is about half and half.

Then we asked the respondents if they agreed on two statements about other religions. First, “If you believe in God, it doesn’t really matter which religion you belong to.” Eighty-six percent agreed; a high number. Next, “The major world religions are equally good ways of finding ultimate truth.” Seventy-four percent agreed. It seems that American Catholics are quite tolerant and relativistic about religions.

The situation today is different from a half century or century ago. Catholics are so imbedded in a pluralistic society, with the strong pressures which it produces urging tolerance and goodwill, that half of them do not say Catholicism has a greater share of the truth than have other religions.

In an earlier study of mainline Protestants, the researchers identified two boundaries around those traditions. The same two apply to American Catholicism today. One boundary is inside the other, and each defines a “zone.” The wider zone is the “tolerance zone.” It is quite wide. It includes all religions in the world which are seen as deserving tolerance. For mainline Protestants and for Catholics, most of the world’s great religions, Christian and non-Christian, fall into that zone. The only faiths falling outside are those which advocate violence, oppression, or rigid control of members.

The smaller zone is the “personal comfort zone,” which includes only churches and denominations in which the respondent would feel personally comfortable. For most mainline Protestants, this includes mainline Protestant denominations, but not fundamentalists or Pentecostals. For the majority of Catholics, this includes only Catholic parishes and communities. At least this is the conclusion to which we came.

Identification of two boundaries to Catholicism, not one, helps us understand the situation today. Laypersons can have a Catholic identity while also saying that most religions deserve tolerance and respect. Only half of the laypersons say that Catholicism has a larger share of truth than other religions. They are Catholics because they have feelings about personal comfort. They feel Catholic in their bones, and it is an aesthetic, ethnic, and group-solidarity matter, not just theological. This situation requires more theological articulation. The question of boundaries is part of Catholic identity, but we should not treat it as the central concern. Our main energy should be positive, directed to the Gospel and the mission of the Church. Too much attention to boundaries is unduly defensive.

### **Conclusions**

We have seen that Catholic young adults differ from the prior generation, and they will tend to maintain their basic values as they age. They will continue to be different in that they will uphold greater individual authority in religious and moral decisions and will desire more lay influence in institutional decision-making. Today they are less personally invested in the institutional Church, and this tendency will continue. They tend to distinguish faith in God from obeying the rules of the institutional Church, clinging more to the former than to the latter, as suggested in the often-heard formula “I’m spiritual but not religious.”

The task of building up Catholic identity calls for encouraging young adult Catholics to immerse themselves in the total tradition and reformulate a Catholic faith and spirituality which is genuinely nourishing. Older adults can help, but they must take guidance from the young adults. Young adults have lived their impressionable years in a different world with a different spiritual space than our world—that of older people.

Caretakers of Catholic institutions should encourage the young adults to search the whole tradition and find the inspiring core. The theological question is, “What is uniquely Catholic, and of that, what is inspiring?” We need to stress who we are as Catholics, rather than who we are not.

On the level of institution, a high priority needs to be regaining trust in church leadership. The 2003 Notre Dame study showed that the sexual abuse crisis is the number-one problem facing the American Catholic Church. In a word, the laity do not have total trust that the American bishops are telling the whole truth. Lay groups have set forth numerous proposals for institutional reforms. The most viable proposals recommend changes at the periphery of the Catholic faith, not the core. The reform movement Voice of the Faithful, in my opinion, gets it right in its slogan: “Keep the faith, change the Church.” I would be even more specific: re-evaluate the nonessential and non-dogmatic components of church life today and make innovations where there are problems. Take small steps. For example, the American bishops need to be more transparent and accountable in their actions, and they need to reach out more to laity, including young adults.

The most hopeful attitudes of Catholic leaders is one of listening, experimenting, encouraging genuine spiritual movements, and making institutional reforms which enhance credibility. The Catholic Church will be here for thousands of years, if not forever, but its specific forms will change, and this will be for the better.

**Dean R. Hoge, 29 September, 2006**

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