

# Reading the Signs of the Times

Over the past forty years we have seen exciting developments in faith formation and learning in the Catholic Church. Parishes across the country have engaged in new ways to encourage Catholics of all ages to deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ and their understanding and practice of the Catholic faith. We have seen the re-introduction of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults; religious education programs for children and teens that are doctrinally sound and developmentally-appropriate; family-centered religious education programs, especially for sacramental preparation; youth ministry programs for teenagers; parish renewal programs such as RENEW and Disciples in Mission; adult education programs; small faith sharing groups, and Bible study groups, to name only a few.

But we also live in times that present tremendous new challenges for developing a Catholic way of life and sharing our Catholic faith with the next generation. Over the past forty years, American Catholics have experienced the gradual loss of a distinctive Catholic culture, held together by ethnicity, multi-generational families, national (ethnic) parishes, and Catholic schools, all set within a local neighborhood. Most Catholics born before 1960 grew up in this Catholic culture and can still vividly remember how they were literally immersed in the Catholic way of life 24/7, 365 days a year. This was a Catholicism grounded in community and tradition.

Today Catholics are not as immersed in Catholic culture and Catholic social networks as they once were. Sociologist Dean Hoge analyzes the situation in this way:

We believe that Catholicism's outsider status in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, the general compliance with hierarchical and institutional norms, and the formative power of Catholic culture in its religious and ethnic dimensions powerfully shaped Catholic identity....Today by contrast, personal choice and religious individualism are dominant. It is this situation—the transformation of Catholicism from a perceived church of obligation and obedience to a church of choice—that has accelerated dramatically in the wake of the 1960s....

This transformation continues today, driven in large part by an exaggerated individualism. Catholic identity construction in America's culture of choice is much less amenable to ecclesiastical control and institutional influence than in the past. (*Young Adult Catholics*, p. 225-226)

Faith formation today no longer exists in the interdependence of the ecology that nurtured people in the Catholic faith. All but gone are the overlapping support environments of Catholic, multi-generational families living together in the neighborhood where the parish was the center of Catholic and community life and the Catholic school provided an education for children. This was a world in which Catholics shared a common language of faith, sacramental symbols, parish experiences, and tradition.

We know that the context for faith formation is changing. How will the trends in society, culture, and Church affect faith formation today and in the future? How will these trends influence the development of a Catholic identity and Catholic way of life among all generations, but especially the new generations of Catholics? This chapter seeks to document several of the most important changes occurring in society and culture, in the Catholic Church, and in the religious profiles of American Catholic generations, and point to the implications of these changes for faith formation today and in the future.

## **Trends in Society and Culture**

There is so much social and cultural change occurring within our country and world, it is hard to catch our breath, much less analyze the changes and their impact on faith formation. The following four themes describe changes that are having a profound impact on faith formation in local parishes. They are by no means the only forces affecting faith formation today, but they have a particular influence on the development of a Catholic identity and a Catholic way of life.

*1. We live in a time of rapid social and cultural transformation, nationally and globally.* We are living in a period of profound change characterized by increasing social, ethnic, cultural, and religious pluralism. Individuals and groups face unprecedented and overwhelming choices, strains in patterns of living, and unprecedented diversity in the people and factors shaping the context for choice. This great diversity makes the process of forming and sustaining a Catholic identity more difficult.

There is a lack of trust in authority generally and a particular disenchantment with groups formerly regarded as authoritative. These include government leaders, civic leaders, educational institutions, law enforcement, the justice system, and institutional religion. The authority of religious leaders has declined, as has people's loyalty to their faith communities and denominational identity.

There is a growing complexity and fragmentation in modern life. It seems that a growing number of organizations—economic, religious, educational, social, recreational—and their organized activities compete for the time and attention of people. Modern life is fragmented into ever smaller units which compete with one another for the participation and loyalty of people. It is very difficult today to develop a sense of coherence in one's life as people are engaged in such a wide diversity of activities.

The competing diversity of organizations and activities contribute to the growing separation of age groups and generations throughout society. More and more activities are targeted to a narrow range of ages or interest groups. As a society we have lost most of the settings in which all of the generations are engaged in meaningful activities together.

**A How do we develop and sustain a Catholic identity and Catholic way of life in a world of increasing diversity, complexity, and age segregation, and with declining trust in authority and loyalty to communities?**

*2. We are a society of increasing secularization with a pluralism of value systems that especially affect the younger generations.* Today's society has no dominant value system or model of social life. Instead, there are a variety of value systems that are often in conflict with one another.

There is no widely acknowledged authority positioned to influence or advocate today's values definitively. In this absence, the entertainment media has become the primary conveyor of our common culture, and with it, the main bearer of the values of a secular society. The values that

today's media present, especially to the young, usually run counter to the Catholic faith and value system. These values are embedded in images that attract and seduce (think MTV and contemporary advertisements). Gone are the days when the Catholic worldview with its images, symbols, values, and traditions was the primary influence on Catholic children and teenagers. Instead, a Catholic identity and way of life is made difficult in a secular society that is so pervasive and hostile to Catholic values.

**A How do we develop and sustain a Catholic identity and Catholic way of life in a secular, pluralistic society where the media is the primary conveyor of society's values?**

*3. We live in an experienced-based, participative, interactive, image-driven, and connected culture.* Contemporary culture has shifted dramatically over the past several decades toward what many people call a "postmodern" culture. Everyone is immersed in the postmodern culture. While today's young adults, teenagers, and children have grown up in this culture and are "native" to it, the older generations have had to learn how to adjust and live in this "new" culture.

Take a moment to think about your everyday experience of today's culture. Have you ever frequented a Starbucks coffee shop, a Home Depot or Lowe's home improvement store, an REI (Recreational Equipment Inc.) store, or a Borders or Barnes and Noble bookstore? Each of these stores sell products, but the commodity is secondary to the experience they provide their customers. Starbucks creates an environment for coffee lovers complete with music, daily newspapers, tables, chairs, and sofas. They have even created their own language for ordering a cup of coffee, suited to the personal tastes of each individual. You are entering a community of coffee-lovers.

Borders and Barnes and Noble provide an experience for book-lovers, complete with a café, chairs and sofas, a children's section with regular programs, book club meetings, and book signings by authors. They have created a community of readers and a "neighborhood center" where it is not unusual for people to spend hours in the store. At each REI store people can experience the products in the store such as testing out climbing equipment on the multi-storied rock climbing wall or riding a bike on the track. REI has turned purchasing outdoor equipment into an experience. Even the aisles of the store resemble a hiking path. Home Depot and Lowe's stores have transformed home improvement into an experience. Each day these stores run numerous clinics to give people the experience

(and confidence) to repair or improve their homes. Customers can try out products before they purchase them.

This cultural change is not limited to businesses. Children's museums, growing in popularity and number over the past twenty years, are experience centers. Any parent or grandparent who has taken children to a museum marvels at the way in which everything is participative and interactive, engaging all of the children's (and adults') senses. Learning about science is embedded in the experience.

Contemporary culture is experienced-based, participative, interactive, image-driven, and connected or relationship-centered. People of all ages, but especially the younger generations, bring these perspectives and expectations to their involvement and learning in the Church.

First, they want to experience life directly. They want to experience the story, the doctrine, the tradition, or the practice directly. It is a multi-sensory culture. People want to taste, touch, see, smell, and hear the story of Jesus and the tradition. It is through experience that they change. Leonard Sweet describes the connection to the Christian way of life this way:

The Way is not a method or a map. The Way is an experience. Postmodern leaders are experience architects. Postmoderns come to church to explore: "Is it real?" "Give me an experience, and then I'll see whether or not I believe it." Try-before-you-buy postmoderns will not first find the meaning of faith in Christ and then participate in the life of the church. Rather, they will participate first and then discern the meaning of faith. In postmodern culture, the experience is the message. (*SoulTsunami*, p. 215)

Second, people want interactivity and participation. They perceive, comprehend, and interact with the world as much as participants as observers. In fact, people do not give their undivided attention to much of anything without it being interactive.

It is no longer enough to possess things or to enjoy positive events. One now has to be involved in bringing those events to pass or brokering those things into the home. People want to participate in the production of content, whatever it is....

Postmoderns are not simply going to transmit the tradition or culture they've been taught. They won't take it unless they can transform it and customize it. Making a culture their own doesn't mean passing on a treasure that they've inherited, but inventing and engineering their own heirloom out of the treasures of the past. (*Post-Modern Pilgrims*, p. 58-59, 62)

Third, contemporary culture is image-driven. We used to live in a word-based, print culture. We now live in a world where story and metaphor are at the heart of spirituality. “Propositions are lost on postmodern ears, but metaphor they will hear; images they will see and understand.” Leonard Sweet describes one of the implications of the image-driven culture in this way:

Cultures are symbol systems, intricate, interwoven webs of metaphors, symbols, and stories. What holds the culture of the church together—the metaphors it offers, the symbols it displays, the stories it tells? The church seems to have lost the plot to the “stories of Jesus.” Could it be because the redemption story was told in the modern era more by “creeds” and “laws” than by “parables”—narrative-wrapped images? (*Post-Modern Pilgrims*, p. 88-89)

Fourth, people hunger for connection and community. Relationship issues stand at the heart of postmodern culture. As John Naisbitt noted in *Megatrends*, the more high tech the society becomes, the more people will seek high touch (relationships). The more impersonal the society becomes, the deeper the hunger for relationships and community. Once again Leonard Sweet notes,

In the midst of a culture of communal anorexia, there is a deepening desire for a life filled with friends, community, service, and creative and spiritual growth. The Church must provide its people with a moral code, a vision of what gives life value, and an experience of embeddedness in a community to which one makes valuable contributions. Personal relationships are key in postmodern ministry....The church must help people build a communal life of deep and rich personal relationships. (*SoulTsunami*, p. 221)

The implications for faith formation are many. Robert Webber, quoting Parker Palmer, suggests that the most appropriate approach to education and nurture in a postmodern world is “a slow, subtle, nearly unconscious process of formation, something like the way a moving stream shapes the rocks over the long passage of time.” Webber summarizes the postmodern shift in education when he writes,

In the postmodern world education will shift from the passing down of information to the passing down of wisdom through experience. Christian truth, which was regarded as propositional, intellectual, and rational will be experienced as an embodied reality. Faith will be communicated through immersion into a community of people who truly live the Christian faith. The corporate commu-

nity will communicate through its depth of commitment, through hospitality, and through images such as baptism, the importance of Scripture, the significance of eucharistic celebration, and the feasts and fasts of the Christian year. These events will shape the imagination of the believer and provide transcendent points of reference that bring meaning to the cycle of life. The meaning of the stories, symbols, cycles of time, and audiovisual experiences of faith may become the center for thoughtful discussion and application in the small group and stimulate both an intellectual and emotional knowing. (*Ancient-Future Faith*, p. 155)

**A How can faith formation become more experiential, participative, interactive, and image-driven? How can faith formation build community and connection among all parishioners?**

**A How can we help people touch, taste, see, smell, and hear the story of Jesus and the Catholic tradition?**

4. *We live in a detraditionalized society where received traditions no longer provide meaning and authority in everyday life.* Diana Butler Bass in her book, *The Practicing Congregation*, describes detraditionalization as “a set of processes...whereby received traditions no longer provide meaning and authority in everyday life” (p. 28). We live in a society where the force of tradition no longer offers personal or spiritual security. People have lost faith in what the tradition has to offer. They do not value tradition and its wisdom. This is true not only for the traditions of family and society, but also of the Catholic faith. Bass, quoting Paul Heelas, a British sociologist, continues,

“Detraditionalization entails,” Heelas explains, “that people have acquired the opportunity to stand back from, critically reflect upon, and lose their faith in what the tradition has to offer. They have to arrive at a position where they can have their own say. Theorists of detraditionalization argue that organized culture—sustained voices of moral and aesthetic authority serving to differentiate values, to distinguish between what is important and what is not, to facilitate coherent, purposeful, identities, life plans or habits of the heart—has disintegrated.” Thus detraditionalization is not only a real word: it is the lived reality of millions of people in today’s world. (*The Practicing Congregation*, p. 30)

We see the processes of detraditionalization directly influencing the Church’s efforts to nurture a Catholic identity, pass on the tradition, and

develop a Catholic way of life in each new generation. Today, anyone involved in teaching the Catholic tradition does so in the face of the forces of detraditionalization.

Despite the power of detraditionalizing forces, “individuals—and congregations—are responding to the larger cultural results of modern fragmentation by creating communities that provide sacred space for the formation of identity and meaning, the construction of ‘pockets’ of connectedness to the long history of Christian witness and practice in a disconnected world” (*The Practicing Congregation*, p. 50). This is the process of *retraditioning*.

Diana Butler Bass notes that “retraditioning implies reaching back to the past, identifying practices that were an important part of that past, and bringing them to the present where they can reshape contemporary life.” We can no longer assume that parishioners know the Catholic story and tradition. It must be imaginatively told, retold, and enacted, so that tradition becomes a living thing. “Retraditioning challenges churches to model a particular way of life; communities of practice that forge, express, and bear certain traditions. Thus, these congregations both carry and craft tradition in intentional ways” (*The Practicing Congregation*, p. 53).

**A How do we provide sacred space for the formation of identity and meaning, connected to the long history of Christian witness and practice?**

**A How do we re-claim the Catholic tradition so that it can reshape the lives of communities and individuals?**

## **Trends in Church Life**

There are a number of trends in Church life that are having a direct impact on developing a Catholic identity and Catholic way of life today. Among the trends that need to be of special concern to Catholic leaders are:

- the steady erosion in Mass attendance over the past fifty years;
- the decline in the number of marriages in the Church and the increase in interfaith marriages;
- the diminishing involvement of families and the younger generations with the Catholic community and the Catholic way of life;
- the decline in religious traditions and practices at home;
- the inability of parishes to keep people engaged in Church life and catechesis after the celebration of first Eucharist, first reconciliation, and confirmation, and/or the completion of children’s catechesis in eighth grade.

## ***Mass Attendance***

Mass attendance has declined steadily from the 1950s, when seventy-five percent of Catholics went to Mass every week, to now, when only one-third attend weekly. A Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) poll conducted in September 2004, estimates that thirty-two percent of Catholics attend Mass every week. This reflects a drop from 1987 when forty-four percent attended weekly and from 1999 when thirty-seven percent attended weekly. This decline has been steeper among the younger generations (only twenty-six percent of young adults age 27-44 attend Mass weekly; only fifteen percent of 18-26 year olds) than oldest generations (about sixty percent of whom still attend weekly). As the size of the oldest generation decreases in the coming decade, they will be replaced by post-Vatican II Catholics who are attending Mass with much less frequency (see Table 1 for more information).

Declining Mass attendance is the tip of the iceberg. Under the water are ominous trends. Declining Mass attendance means that baptized Catholics are having less contact and involvement with the Catholic community and the Catholic way of life. This does not bode well for the future. Baptized Catholics are drifting away from core Catholic practice and one wonders how long you can maintain a Catholic imagination without regular contact with the sacramental life of the Church.

**A What will inspire Catholics in a positive way to re-embrace the Mass, this core practice of the Catholic tradition?**

## ***Marriage***

First, we know that young Catholics are marrying later and beginning families later than their parents or grandparents did. For many, this may mean that there are ten or more years after finishing high school before they marry and then several more years before they have their first child.

Second, although a majority of marriages still take place in the Church, the percentage of marriages taking place outside the Church is increasing (from no more than ten percent among pre-Vatican II Catholics to as many as one-third of post-Vatican II Catholics). Even those who marry other Catholics are increasingly not marrying in the Church.

Third, interfaith marriages continue to increase, from twenty-four percent among pre-Vatican II Catholics to forty percent among post-Vatican II Catholics. Fifty percent of all non-Latino Catholic marriages are now to non-Catholics. Increasing numbers of Catholics marrying non-Catholics are doing so outside the Church.

If the above trends continue, they will have serious ramifications for the future.

- If the length between high school and marriage continues to be a decade or more and if only fifteen percent of today's young adults (18-26) attend Mass weekly, can we assume that they are going to return to the Church to be married and begin active participation in Church life?
- If the length of time between marriage and the birth of the first child continues to widen, can we assume that young couples are going to bring their first child for baptism in the Church and become active in Church life?
- If the trend of marrying outside of the Church continues, can we assume that these couples will "come back" to the Church to have their children baptized?
- If couples do not marry in the Church and/or do not bring their children to be baptized, can we assume they are going to bring their children to religious education classes and preparation for first Eucharist and first reconciliation?

**A How can we engage single young adults, married couples in the first years of marriage, and new parents with young children in the life of the faith community and in continuing faith formation?**

**A How can we provide faith formation that addresses the needs of families, especially interfaith families, and helps them build family faith sharing traditions and practices at home?**

### ***Participation and Practice***

Research findings and pastoral experience point to the fact that the Church is experiencing a decline in the involvement of families and the younger generations with the Catholic community and the Catholic way of life. Sunday Mass attendance is only one indicator, but if people are not coming to Mass, what is the likelihood they are participating in the programs, community life, and ministries of the parish? James Davidson and his colleagues have analyzed participation rates and they conclude that using religious practice as a criterion, one could say with fairness that participation in Catholic community life is off about thirty-five to forty-five percent since the 1950s. All other things being equal, it is reasonable to predict that Catholics will be less attached to and involved in the Church

twenty years from now as the pre-Vatican II generation dies and the post-Vatican II generation increases.

Complicating this picture is the inability of parishes to keep people engaged in parish life and continuing faith formation after the celebration of first Eucharist, first reconciliation, confirmation, and/or the completion of children's catechesis in eighth grade. Even while children and teens are participating in catechetical programs, the majority do not attend Mass weekly. And these are the people who are participating in the parish's catechetical program. There seems to be little or no connection between participation in a catechetical program and participation in parish life, especially Sunday Mass.

We also see a decline in religious traditions and practices at home. There are a variety of reasons for this, such as the complexity and busyness of everyday life, but one of the major reasons is the religious literacy and religious experience of today's parents. Many parents did not grow up in families where they experienced religious traditions and practices. Many were away from the Church for ten or more years before returning with their children for first Eucharist or the start of catechetical programming in first grade. They simply do not have the fluency with the Catholic tradition or the confidence to share it with their children.

If these three trends continue, we will see less and less contact and involvement with the Catholic community and Catholic way of life, and the continuing decline of Catholic traditions and practices at home. This is hardly a hope-filled future.

**A How can faith formation re-engage people in the life of the faith community and provide continuous faith formation throughout life?**

**A How can faith formation empower and equip families to develop a community of faith and practice at home?**

## **Trends in the Faith Life of Catholic Generations**

Every six years since 1987, James Davidson, Dean Hoge, William D'Antonio, and their colleagues have studied American Catholic generations. Their one-of-a-kind research has provided invaluable insights into the faith and practice of American Catholics. They are documenting the changing face of the four generations of American Catholics.

Demographically, Catholics are divided into three broad groups:

- 17% Pre-Vatican II generation (born in or before 1940)
- 33% Vatican II generation (born between 1941-1960)
- 49% Post-Vatican II generation (born since 1961, including Generation X and millennials)

Overall, they report that U.S. Catholics, who exhibited extraordinarily high levels of commitment to the Church and compliance with Church teachings in the 1950s, continue to experience God's presence in their lives. At the same time, they are less attached to the Church, less likely to participate in the sacraments and traditional practices, more likely to distinguish between teachings they consider core (and tend to accept), such as the Real Presence and Mary as the Mother of God, and the ones they consider peripheral (and tend to disagree with), such as birth control. And they show no signs of returning to earlier levels of religious orthodoxy.

The research team identified a number of important trends. They found that among American Catholics, there is

- a persistent sense of being Catholic;
- a continuing belief in core teachings such as the Trinity, incarnation, resurrection, and Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist;
- less religious practice, from higher levels among pre-Vatican II Catholics to lower levels of behavioral involvement among young Catholics;
- less attachment to the Church as institution;
- a movement from obedience to personal autonomy;
- increasing emphasis on conscience as the locus of authority regarding sexuality and reproductive issues.

The research team organized their 2005 findings into several categories. We will briefly examine four areas of the research findings and their implications for faith formation:

1. center of Catholic identity,
2. boundaries of Catholic identity,
3. generational differences, and
4. religious literacy.

### ***1. Center of Catholic Identity***

When asked what they consider most central, authentic, and important in being Catholic, eighty-four percent of Catholics ages eighteen and older identified helping the poor and belief in Jesus' resurrection from the dead;

seventy-six percent noted sacraments, such as Eucharist; and seventy-four percent said the Catholic Church's teaching about Mary as the Mother of God. These are clearly at the center of Catholic identity for all generations of Catholics (see Table 2 for more information).

In a 1997 study of Catholic young adults (ages 20-39) who had been confirmed as teenagers, Dean Hoge and his colleagues found very similar findings. When asked, "How essential is each of these elements to your vision of what the Catholic faith is?" young adults identified very similar elements as the 2005 study. The most important beliefs included the belief that God is present in the sacraments (65%), the belief that Christ is really present in the Eucharist (58%), charitable efforts toward helping the poor (58%), devotion to Mary (53%), and belief that God is present in a special way in the poor (52%).

How do these two surveys help us understand Catholic identity today? First, the researchers conclude that credal beliefs are the main boundary markers of the faith: belief in Jesus' resurrection and belief in the presence of God in the sacraments, especially the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In addition, Catholics identify helping the poor and concern for social justice as essential to their Catholic identity.

Second, whatever the alienation of Catholics may be on some items of Catholic teaching, such as moral teachings, their imagination is still Catholic. In his book, *The Catholic Imagination*, Andrew Greeley identifies the three main areas of Catholic imagination: sacramentality, community, and hierarchy. It is clear that the strongest components of Catholic identity for American Catholics, and young adults in particular, are sacramental, community, and Marian. In the young adult survey, hierarchy is also present, since almost half of the respondents think that having a pope is essential.

In their summary of the research in *Young Adult Catholics*, Hoge and his colleagues offer this assessment:

There are positive signs of young adult Catholic vitality today. Most young adults like being Catholic and cannot imagine themselves being anything other than Catholic. The overwhelming majority see the sacraments and devotion to Mary as essential to the Catholic faith. Some want to play a more active role in the Church. Most consider themselves spiritual, pray regularly, and support the Church's social mission.

Young adult Catholics differ from mainline Protestants in that they (especially Latinos) have a stronger ethnic identity, a stronger identification with their church, and a more basic feeling that

Catholicism is the “real thing.” They see Catholicism as the oldest and most central expression of Christianity, in continuity with the apostolic tradition and hallowed by the ages. Catholics seem to have a “glue” that Protestants do not have. They see Catholicism as a basic part of their being. In spite of beliefs and practices that are sometimes divergent, they remain “Catholic.” Many young adult Catholics also take pride in the global dimensions of Catholicism and in the media visibility of a pope (John Paul II) whose personal integrity and firmness on moral and ethical questions are admired and respected even when not always followed personally. (p. 218-219)

## **2. *Boundaries of Catholic Identity***

A second question that researchers have asked American Catholics since 1987 concerns what is necessary to be a good Catholic. The findings are remarkably consistent since the first survey in 1987. The most essential requirements for being a good Catholic include believing that Jesus physically rose from the dead, believing that in the Mass the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus, and donating time or money to help the poor. Obeying the Church’s teachings on abortion, birth control, and divorce and remarriage are among the least imperative requirements for being a good Catholic. Seventy-six percent of American Catholics agree that you can be a good Catholic without going to church every Sunday (see Table 4 for more information).

Two other questions in the 2005 survey reveal how Catholics perceive boundaries. The first question concerns the truth of Catholicism: fifty-six percent agreed with the statement that “Catholicism contains a greater share of truth than other religions do.” This tells us that about one-half of American Catholics are uncertain about the greater truth of Catholicism as a defining boundary. Older persons tended to agree more—sixty-one percent of Catholics sixty-five or over did so, compared to forty-three percent of those twenty-six or younger.

The second question explores the belief-practice issue: eighty-eight percent agree that “How a person lives is more important than whether he or she is a Catholic.” This tells us that the vast majority of Catholics take more seriously a person’s behavior than his or her professed creed or church membership. In effect, a Catholic’s behavior is actually a more consequential boundary. On this statement, both young and old agreed, according to Dean Hoge, in “Center of Catholic Identity” (*National Catholic Reporter*, September 30, 2005).

These survey findings contribute to an understanding of how American Catholics view Catholic identity today. They are not statements of theology, only of respondents' view of Catholic identity. In the words of Dean Hoge, "All we can say is that we have tried to measure the current reality. Knowing the actual situation on the ground is useful, since it tells us what is empowering and nourishing about the lived faith."

He continues, "This research also gives a hint about change. From the research we have seen, the center is not shifting. The main change is in the boundaries—they are now fairly vague and porous, and they are slowly becoming more so over time. Boundaries that make no sense to young adults cannot be maintained over the long haul. More meaningful boundaries need to be defined and explained."

### ***3. Generational Differences***

There is broad agreement across the generations on the core elements of the creed and Catholic beliefs that have been part of the Catholic tradition for centuries. These core elements are the single most important basis of Catholic unity. They are the glue that holds Catholics together. They are the reasons why Catholics remain loyal to the Church, even when they disagree with it on other matters.

Social teachings represent another area of common ground. Most Catholics embrace the principle of concern for the poor and helping the needy. Parishioners may disagree on specific social policies, but very few reject the Church's emphasis on a "preferential option for the poor" and Church involvement in social justice issues. The differences across generations occur over the level of commitment to the Church and on moral teachings, especially in the areas of sexuality and gender. Overall, we can say that parishioners' views of faith and morals form a rather loosely integrated Catholic worldview. William D'Antonio analyzes the generational differences in this way,

Our surveys suggest that people are adrift in different degrees across the generations. The young and middle-aged are different from the older pre-Vatican II generation in being less committed to parish life and Church involvement, and in emphasizing much more the role of individual conscience in the face of moral issues. In addition, the 2005 survey found a split in the youngest generation in that the very youngest (ages 18-26) were even less Church-involved and more oriented to conscience than older young adults.

These generational differences occur not because people change as

they age but because young adults enter the adult population at a different place. They are already different when pollsters first encounter them at age 18, 20, or 22. Sociologists call this pattern “cohort replacement,” which means that older people are replaced in the total population by young cohorts whose life history is necessarily different from the outgoing cohort or generation. This produces change overall even though the great majority of individuals within the cohort don’t change much during their adult lives. Each generation is relatively constant, yet each is distinctive. (“Generational Differences,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 30, 2005)

In short, any hope for a natural “rebound” or “U-shape effect,” with younger Catholics embracing views and practices similar to their grandparents’ generation (pre-Vatican II), is not justified by the research. Rather, it appears that there is a linear trend away from conventional religious sensibilities, with the youngest Catholics being the least inclined to maintain traditional faith practices and morals.

In their 1997 book, *The Search for Common Ground*, James Davidson and his colleagues underscored these generational differences and the clear trend that the post-Vatican II Catholics will not return to traditional levels of religious belief and practice on their own.

While some of the differences are due to age, to an even greater extent, these differences reflect the different experiences that age groups have during their formative years. Catholics raised in the 1930s and ’40s, 1950s and ’60s, and 1970s and ’80s were raised in very different societal conditions. While the oldest cohort experienced economic depression and World War II during its formative years, the middle cohort experienced the prosperity of the post-war years and the social movements of the 1960s; the youngest cohort experienced the economic polarization and social dilemmas of the last 20 years. The cohorts also experienced three very different types of Catholicism: the pre-Vatican II Church, the Vatican II Church, and the post-Vatican II Church. As a result, they learned very different approaches to religion in their lives. Other research on cohort effects also suggests that learning experiences during people’s formative years affect their religious outlooks through their lives. When and if today’s young Catholics become more involved in the Church, they will bring with them the social and religious outlooks they learned during their formative years. Their approaches to faith and morals will never be the same as those currently held by their parents and grandparents.

These cohort differences point to declining levels of childhood

religiosity, closeness to God, and commitment to the Church. Young Catholics are less religious in childhood than their parents and grandparents; they report few experiences of God's presence in their lives; and they are less committed to the Church. Unless steps are taken, these trends portend a future of dwindling faithfulness among young Catholics, diminishing awareness of God's presence in the lives of Catholic adults, further erosion of Catholic identity, and a declining sense that the Church is worth supporting. These trends, in turn, signal a continuation of recent tendencies to disagree with traditional faith and morals and to embrace religious ideas that are incompatible with Church teachings. (p. 203-204)

#### **4. Religious Literacy**

To see how widespread religious illiteracy is in today's Church, the research team asked American Catholics to agree or disagree with the following statement: "You often feel that you cannot explain your faith to others." James Davidson reports that while this item is only one of many possible indicators of illiteracy, the responses are instructive. Forty-nine percent of American Catholics said that they cannot explain their faith to other people, while fifty-one percent disagreed and said they could explain their faith to others. Those who are better educated, such as college graduates, and more involved in the Church, such as those who attend Mass two to three times a month, are least likely to say they cannot explain their faith to others.

Are there generational differences among those who cannot explain their faith to others? The percent who cannot explain their faith to others actually decreases as you move from the pre-Vatican II generation to the post-Vatican II generation: pre-Vatican II—fifty-nine percent, Vatican II—forty-nine percent, post-Vatican II (Gen X)—forty-four percent, and post-Vatican II (millennials)—forty-seven percent. "Religious illiteracy is highest among pre-Vatican II Catholics. It is the older, not the younger, Catholics who have the hardest time explaining their faith to others" ("Challenging Assumptions about Young Catholics," American Catholics Survey, *National Catholic Reporter*, September 30, 2005).

What are we to make of these findings? Religious illiteracy appears to be rather widespread and affects all four generations. It is not a youth or young adult problem. Religious literacy is an ongoing concern, and efforts to increase religious literacy should be oriented to Catholics of all ages, not just young adults.

## Conclusions

What can we conclude from these research findings? The 2005 research, supported by the prior three studies (1987, 1993, and 1999), raise critical issues of Catholic identity and Catholic practice that the Church and faith formation need to address. These conclusions form an agenda for faith formation today and in the future.

1. The center of Catholic identity is creedal beliefs and helping the poor/concern for social justice. Catholics are more likely to distinguish between teachings they consider core (and tend to accept) and ones they view as peripheral (and tend to disagree with).
2. The boundaries of Catholic identity are now fairly vague and porous, and they are slowly becoming more so over time. Boundaries that make no sense to the post-Vatican II generations cannot be maintained over the long haul.
3. There has been an uncoupling of faith and Church life, also Catholic identity and attachment to the Church. Catholics are more likely to identify with the Catholic faith than the institutional Church. For many, Catholicism is less a matter of core identity and more a matter of personal option; it is more individualistic. We see this especially within the post-Vatican II generations.
4. Catholics, especially young adults, are less attached to the Church and less likely to participate in sacraments and traditional devotional practices.
5. The Vatican II and post-Vatican II generations of Catholics show no signs of returning to the early levels of religious orthodoxy and practice demonstrated by the pre-Vatican II generation.
6. Religious literacy is a problem across all generations. Across generations, but especially among post-Vatican II generations, people have a difficult time articulating a coherent sense of Catholic identity. While young adults like being Catholic, they are not sure what is distinctive about Catholicism, what Catholic heritage actually means, and what are Catholicism's core narratives.

The summary by Dean Hoge and his colleagues in *Young Adult Catholics* captures the urgency of our present situation. The trends within the post-Vatican II generations of Catholics are clear and urgent.

For many young adults, Catholic identity is weak, focused outside the institutional Church, and only moderately central to their lives. The implications are portentous. If many young adults now believe

that Catholicism is simply another denomination, that it “doesn’t really matter that much whether you’re Catholic or not,” that there is nothing unique or distinctive about Catholicism, or that all that really counts is a generic Christian lifestyle, Catholicism’s institutional vitality, public witness, and capacity to retain its young are in jeopardy. Weak centrality of Catholic identity will have a snowballing effect on a variety of behaviors adversely impacting the Church, including moral choices, choices about marriage partners, child rearing practices, Catholic schooling, church attendance, and others. Nor can one assume that marriage will continue to serve as a port of entry (or reentry) into the Church. Young adult Catholics are waiting later to marry and therefore experiencing longer periods of disconnectedness from the Church. Fifty percent of all non-Latino Catholic marriages are now to non-Catholics. Increasing numbers of Catholics marrying non-Catholics are doing so outside the Church. These trends will have serious ramifications for the future. (*Young Adult Catholics*, p. 228-229)

## **The Impact of the Trends**

It is hard not to be overwhelmed by the trends affecting faith formation in the Catholic Church. These trends create a sense of urgency to which we need to respond to now. There is much at stake. Dean Hoge says it very well when he writes, “Without a distinct sense of identity, a shared faith and some common elements of religious life relating to sacraments, discipleship, community, tradition, and hierarchy, there is no Catholicism” (*Young Adult Catholics*, p. 229).

The analysis of these trends makes it clear that our faith formation efforts need to respond to the reality of the current situation in the American Catholic Church. It is painful to face these trends. It is difficult to change our current ways of doing things, but that is what we are being called to do. How can parish faith formation in the Catholic Church respond to the urgency of our present and future situation? We now turn our attention to this question.

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<b>Table 1. Attend Mass Weekly or More</b>				
	Pre-Vatican II Generation (born in or before 1940)	Vatican II Generation (born 1941-1960)	Post-Vatican II Generation (born 1961-1979)	Millennial Generation (18-26 year olds only)
1987	58%	40%	30%	
1993	63%	42%	27%	
1999	64%	42%	27%	
2005	60%	35%	26%	15%

*"AMERICAN CATHOLICS SURVEY," NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER, SEPTEMBER 30, 2005*

**Table 2. Center of Catholic Identity**

What is most central, authentic, and important in being Catholic?

**MOST IMPORTANT**

- 84%    Helping the poor

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- 84%    Belief in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead

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- 76%    Sacraments, such as Eucharist

---

- 74%    The Catholic Church’s teaching about Mary as the Mother of God

---

- 54%    Having a regular daily prayer life

---

- 50%    Participation in devotions, such as Eucharistic adoration  
or praying the Rosary

---

- 47%    The Catholic Church’s teachings that oppose same-sex marriage

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- 47%    Church involvement in activities directed toward social justice

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- 44%    The Catholic Church’s teachings that oppose abortion

---

- 42%    The teaching authority claimed by the Vatican

---

- 35%    The Catholic Church’s teachings that oppose the death penalty

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- 29%    A celibate male clergy

*"AMERICAN CATHOLICS SURVEY," NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER, SEPTEMBER 30, 2005*

**Table 3. Catholic Young Adults**

How essential is each of these elements to your vision of what the Catholic faith is?

**VERY IMPORTANT**

- 65%    Belief that God is present in the sacraments

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- 58%    Belief that Christ is really present in the Eucharist

---

- 58%    Charitable efforts toward helping the poor

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- 53%    Devotion to Mary

52%	Belief that God is present in a special way in the poor
48%	Having religious orders of priests, sisters, brothers, and monks
48%	Necessity of having a pope
45%	Being a universal Church throughout the world
42%	Efforts toward eliminating social causes of poverty, such as unequal wages and discrimination
42%	The teaching that Christ established the authority of the bishops by choosing Peter
41%	Having a regular daily prayer life
41%	Devotion to the saints
37%	Obligation to attend Mass once a week
32%	Private confession to a priest
31%	Teachings that oppose abortion
27%	Belief that priests must be celibate
22%	Teachings that oppose the death penalty
17%	Belief that only men can be priests
14%	Church's traditional support of the right of workers to unionize

DEAN HOGE, WILLIAM DINGES, MARY JOHNSON, AND JUAN GONZALES. *YOUNG ADULT CATHOLICS*, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME PRESS, 1997, P. 201

### **Table 4. Boundaries of Catholic Identity**

Can you be a good Catholic without this?

**YES**

23%	Without believing that Jesus physically rose from the dead
36%	Without believing that in the Mass, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus
44%	Without donating time or money to help the poor
58%	Without obeying the Church hierarchy's teaching regarding abortion
58%	Without donating time or money to help the parish
66%	Without obeying the Church hierarchy's teaching on divorce and remarriage
67%	Without their marriage being approved by the Catholic Church
75%	Without obeying the Church hierarchy's teaching on birth control
76%	Without going to church every Sunday

"AMERICAN CATHOLICS SURVEY," *NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER*, SEPTEMBER 30, 2005