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The Post-Vatican II Generation of “Christian Catholics”¹

There is an awful lot of discussion about young Catholics these days. Catholic publications are full of articles about the post-Vatican II generation (e.g., Heckler-Feltz, 1997; Mancha, 1997; Staley, 1997; De-Turris, 1997; Scott, 1997).

Some church leaders worry about a loss of faith and moral perspective among so-called “Generation X.” The American bishops and leaders such as Joan Weber fear that young Catholics have very little attachment to the Church and that they are more inclined than any generation before them to make faith and moral decisions that are not in accordance with official church teachings. These concerns are fueled by writers such as Paul Wilkes (1996) and Robert Ludwig (1995) who claim that young Catholics are the most highly educated, but religiously illiterate, generation of all. These concerns also gain support from research by McNamara (1992) and others indicating declining levels of religious commitment and increased dissent among young Catholics.

Other leaders and researchers believe that today’s young Catholics are not much different from previous generations of young people. These observers (e.g., Greeley, 1989, 1990) assume that post-Vatican II Catholics express only limited interest in the Church and its teachings while they are young and single but, like generations before them, will rebound when they get married and have children. This more optimistic view suggests there is little or no need for church leaders to worry; post-Vatican II Catholics will bounce back, just as previous generations have, when they settle down and have children of their own.

Still other church leaders and analysts offer a third point of view: that, even before they marry and have children, today’s young Catholics are tending toward traditional approaches to faith and morals. Catechists and religious educators sometimes tell me that today’s young are more conservative than the previous generation of Catholics. These

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leaders have a sense that more and more young Catholics think the Church is important and want to embrace its teachings. They are encouraged by studies indicating increased conservatism among seminarians and young lay people (Cimino, 1996).

Which view is right? Compared to their parent's generation, are today's young people moving further and further away from the Church? Are they more traditional in their approaches to faith and morals than their parent's generation? Or, are they no different from previous generations of young people?

In my view, the best and most recent evidence indicates that today's young Catholics are different from their parents' and grandparents' generations; that overall they are increasingly inclined toward beliefs and practices that are not in line with official church teachings; and that there are very few signs of any trend toward more traditional beliefs and practices. There is little or no reason to believe post-Vatican II Catholics will think and act just like their parents and grandparents in the years ahead. I base my argument largely on national studies I have conducted in 1993 and 1995 (D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and Wallace, 1996; Davidson et al., 1997). I also base it on focus groups that colleagues and I have done with different generations of Catholics.

THREE GENERATIONS

Generations are cohorts of people who were born at different periods of time and, as a result, share experiences that unite them and give them unique perspectives on all facets of life, including religion (Mannheim, 1952; Walrath, 1987; Roof, 1993; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens, 1994; Williams and Davidson, 1996; Davidson et al., 1997). Generationally-specific worldviews that are formed during one's formative years last for a lifetime, producing different interpretations of the same lifecourse experiences. Formative experiences do not totally determine what we think forever, but they do foster ideas and actions that tend to persist well into our adult lives. I suggest, for purposes of this topic, one can think in terms of three generations, which I describe below.

Oldest Generation: "Catechism Catholics"

The oldest cohort consists of Americans who were born in the 1920s and '30s. These people experienced the Great Depression and World War II during their formative years. They have been labeled "the depression generation" or "the World War II generation" because these experiences have shaped their outlook on all kinds of matters, including money and national pride.

Catholics in this cohort were born and raised entirely in the pre-Vatican II Church. They tended to live in the so-called Catholic ghetto,

consisting of predominantly Catholic neighbors, Catholic parishes and schools, Catholic newspapers and publishing companies, and a whole network of Catholic organizations ranging from Catholic boy scouts and girl scouts to Catholic professional societies. They learned their faith and morals from priests and sisters, who relied on the Baltimore Catechism as their main teaching tool. They learned a pre-Vatican II theology that stressed the evil of the “outside” (largely Protestant) world; the idea that the Catholic Church is the “one true Church”; the teaching authority of the Church; the need for lay people to obey church teachings; a punitive concept of God emphasizing suffering, sin, guilt, judgment, and punishment. This is the “pre-Vatican II generation,” though we can also refer to its members as “Catechism Catholics” (emphasizing the prominence of the Baltimore Catechism in their upbringing).

Middle Generation: “Council Catholics”

The middle cohort includes people who were born in the 1940s and ‘50s. They were the population explosion that followed World War years, but also experienced the social and cultural turmoil of the 1960s. This generation is usually called the “baby boomers,” though sometimes it is called “the ‘60s generation.”

Catholics in this cohort have one foot in the “old” (pre-Vatican II) Church and one foot in the “new” (post-Vatican II) Church. In their earliest years, they experienced the same religious formation as “Catechism Catholics.” Then, all of a sudden, Vatican II took place. They learned that many of the old rules governing faith and morals were going to change. A loving God would replace their punitive God; English would replace Latin; guitars would replace the organ; folk songs would replace Gregorian Chant; and ecumenism would replace the parochialism of the past. We have called this generation “Vatican II Catholics” or “Council Catholics” (emphasizing the importance of the council as a defining moment in their formative years).

Youngest Generation: “Christian Catholics”

The youngest cohort consists of people born in the 1960s and ‘70s. This generation has experienced new levels of individual and collective freedom (e.g., women’s movement, gay rights movement); economic prosperity among the rich, but stagnation and impoverishment among workers and the poor; political conservatism (downsizing of the federal government, increased emphasis on local government); and the dissolution of many traditional relationships (increased divorce rates and more “latchkey children”). Young people have been told, and tend to agree, that theirs will be the first generation of Americans that will be

worse off than their parents' generation. Much to their chagrin, they are usually called "Generation X," "Gen X," or "the thirteenth generation."

Catholics in this cohort have been raised entirely in the post-Vatican II Church. All they know of the pre-Vatican II Church is what little their grandparents and parents have told them. They grew up in the post-Vatican II world of guitar music, altars facing the people and Mass in English. We have called this cohort the "post-Vatican II" generation or "Christian Catholics" (emphasizing their tendency to emphasize their status as Christians over their membership in the Catholic Church).

ARE YOUNG CATHOLICS DIFFERENT? IF SO, IN WHAT WAY?

Colleagues and I conducted focus groups with members of all three generations (Williams and Davidson, 1996; Davidson et al., 1997). The qualitative data we obtained from these focus groups revealed several tendencies among young Catholics. As I have reported elsewhere in more detail (D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and Wallace, 1996), post-Vatican II Catholics:

- Place a higher priority on being good Christians than they do on being good Catholics. This reflects their religious education, which, in the wake of Vatican II's ecumenical emphasis, has stressed the common ground—not the differences—between Protestants and Catholics.
- Have a deinstitutionalized and democratic view of the Church. This finding is consistent with Kennedy's (1988) view that post-Vatican II Catholics are more inclined to think of the Church as the "people of God" working out their faith in collaboration with others, not as a hierarchical organization demanding their compliance with religious authority.
- Make a rather sharp distinction between God's law and Church law and, when the two are in tension with each other, put higher priority on God's law than on Church law. This finding is consistent with McNamara's (1992) idea that young Catholics emphasize "conscience first, tradition second."
- Are not as informed about Church teachings. Wilkes (1996) also argues that young Catholics are the most educated, yet religiously illiterate, generation in the Church.
- Are more likely to think and act in ways that disagree with Church teachings. This finding is consistent with McNamara's (1992) longitudinal study of young Catholics.
- View God as an all-loving and forgiving friend who wants us to be nice to others. Markey (1994) also calls attention to the recent emphasis on a loving God and what he calls the "theology of being nice."

- Lack a vocabulary to help them form a Catholic identity and interpret their specifically Catholic experiences. In contrast to older Catholics who use a rich specifically-Catholic language to describe their religious experiences, young Catholics speak a generically-Christian language that is also used by young people in mainline and evangelical Protestant denominations.
- Have learned that the rightness or wrongness of one's actions depends on the circumstances and the effects their actions have on others. Ryba (1994) also has noted the shift from a natural law approach in ethics to a consequentialist approach.

Overall, we concluded that there has been an inter-generational shift from an institutional to a more individualistic approach to faith and morals (Williams and Davidson, 1996; Davidson et al., 1997). While Catechism Catholics tend to see the Church as mediating their relationship with God, Council Catholics and especially Christian Catholics place more emphasis on having a personal relationship with Jesus. The pre-Vatican II cohort stresses the importance of obeying Church teachings; the Vatican II generation and especially the post-Vatican II Catholics emphasize their personal faith journeys and the need to be nice to other persons.

Colleagues and I have examined this inter-generational shift in more detail using quantitative data from two national surveys. The 1993 survey was the basis for our book *Laity: American and Catholic* (D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and Wallace, 1996). The 1995 survey is summarized in our latest book *The Search for Common Ground: What Unites and Divides Catholic Americans* (Davidson et al., 1997).

The 1993 national survey indicated a growing preference for more democratic decision making in the Church; declining levels of religious commitment; and dwindling levels of compliance with Church teachings. Here are some specifics.

Whereas 52 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics wanted more democratic decision making in their parishes, 61 percent of Vatican II Catholics and 67 percent of post-Vatican II Catholics agreed with that idea. While 58 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics wanted more lay participation in the selection of parish priests, 75 percent of Vatican II and 83 percent of post-Vatican II Catholics felt lay people ought to be involved in the selection of priests. Essentially the same inter-generational pattern prevailed in responses to our questions about matters such as parish budgets, the ordination of women, divorce and remarriage, and abortion.

Declining levels of commitment were evident in responses to items about the frequency of Mass attendance and prayer and the importance of the Church. Whereas 59 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics

said the Church is a very important part of their lives, only 48 percent of Vatican II Catholics and 29 percent of post-Vatican II Catholics felt that way. While 63 percent of the oldest cohort attended Mass weekly, only 45 percent of the middle cohort and only 24 percent of the youngest cohort did. Ninety percent of Catechism Catholics said they pray daily, compared to two-thirds of Council Catholics, and only 53 percent of Christian Catholics.

Dwindling levels of compliance with Church teachings also are apparent in answers to questions about what it takes to be a good Catholic. Forty-two percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics said one can be a good Catholic without believing in papal infallibility, but the percentage climbed to 51 percent among Vatican II Catholics and 55 percent among post-Vatican II Catholics. While 40 percent of the oldest cohort said one can be a good Catholic without accepting the Church's view of abortion, 53 percent of the middle cohort and 67 percent of the youngest cohort made that claim.

By and large, the 1995 survey confirms these findings. However, it also points to some important new insights relating to eight dimensions of faith and morals, which are defined below.

Pan-Vatican II beliefs include doctrines, embedded in the Nicene Creed, that were core Church teachings prior to the council and have been ever since. For example, the council did not change the Church teachings regarding the trinity, incarnation, the resurrection, transubstantiation, and Mary as the Mother of God.

Pre-Vatican II beliefs include ideas that were taught more vigorously prior to the council than since Vatican II. Beliefs of this type include the idea that the Church is the one true Church, that lay people are to obey Church teachings even if they do not understand them, and that the pope is the Vicar of Christ. We also asked about the idea of returning to more traditional teachings.

A third dimension, which we called *recent ideas*, includes opinions and attitudes that were largely anathema before the council but have gained in popularity since the council (e.g., ordaining women, being a good Catholic without attending Mass, priests and lay people having equal status in the Church, the use of inclusive language). Most of these ideas cannot be traced to the council itself, but have emerged in recent years as "the people of God" have experimented with new understandings of Church.

Pan-Vatican II practices include public rituals and private devotions that were prominent prior to Vatican II and remain important practices to this day. These include Mass attendance, reception of Holy Communion, participation in holy days of obligation, and private prayer.

Pre-Vatican II practices include activities that used to be emphasized but have not been promoted as vigorously in recent years. We examined

four such practices: starting and ending each day with prayer, praying the Rosary, practicing devotions to Mary or special saints, and going to individual confession with a priest.

Recent practices include activities that were not part of Catholic spirituality prior to the council but which have been emphasized much more in recent years. These include group penance and a variety of Scripture-oriented devotional practices such as reading the Bible, attending Bible study, and belonging to prayer groups and faith sharing groups.

We examined four matters of *sexual and reproductive ethics*: pre-marital sex, use of condoms and pills to prevent pregnancy, abortion, and homosexual activities. We asked Catholics whether these actions are always wrong, usually wrong except under certain circumstances, or completely up to the individual to decide.

We also explored four items relating to the Church's *social teachings*, especially its preferential option for the poor. These items related to the importance of helping the needy, the idea that the Church ought to be involved in economic and political issues, Catholics' duty to help close the gap between the rich and the poor, and the morality of economic decisions that increase poverty.

This exploration includes a wider variety of issues than most recent studies, which tend to focus on hot topics related to recent ideas and sexual and reproductive ethics and tend to overlook pan-Vatican II beliefs, pre-Vatican II beliefs, and social teachings. As a result, the 1995 study leads to several new insights. The results for the total Catholic population and the three birth cohorts are found in Table 1.

Table 1
Faith and Morals by Generation
(percent)

	Total Sample	Pre- Vatican II	Post- Vatican II	Vatican II
<i>Pan-Vatican II Beliefs (very important)</i>				
Mary as Mother of God	73	80	66	75
Resurrection	71	83	65	70
Incarnation	68	75	63	69
Transubstantiation	63	79	57	57
Trinity	53	66	48	49
<i>Pre-Vatican II Beliefs (agree)</i>				
Pope is Vicar of Christ	71	81	67	69
Put more emphasis on traditional teachings	62	69	58	61
Church is one true Church	50	64	45	46
Important to obey even if don't understand	45	57	37	44

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	Total Sample <i>(cont'd)</i>	Pre- Vatican II <i>(cont'd)</i>	Post- Vatican II <i>(cont'd)</i>	Vatican II <i>(cont'd)</i>
<i>Recent Ideas (agree)</i>				
Lay people just as important as priests	84	81	86	85
Can be good Catholic without going to Mass	64	51	63	73
Women should be allowed to be priests	58	41	61	66
Exclusive language bothers me	30	25	28	36
<i>Pan-Vatican II Practices</i>				
Private prayer (weekly or more)	77	82	78	73
Mass attendance (weekly or more)	43	64	40	33
Holy Days of Obligation (regularly)	40	53	29	42
Holy Communion (weekly or more)	36	54	31	28
<i>Pre-Vatican II Practices</i>				
Start and end day with prayer (weekly or more)	65	79	63	58
Private confession (once a year or more)	43	52	37	44
Devotion to Mary/Saints (weekly or more)	29	49	28	16
Rosary (weekly or more)	20	40	16	11
<i>Recent Practices</i>				
Group penance (once a year or more)	24	30	25	19
Bible reading (weekly or more)	19	23	17	17
Prayer/faith sharing group (monthly or more)	12	15	13	9
Bible study (monthly or more)	9	9	7	8
<i>Sexual-Reproductive Ethics (always wrong)</i>				
Homosexual acts	46	60	39	44
Abortion	34	45	31	31
Pre-marital sex	28	50	22	18
Artificial birth control	8	17	5	5
<i>Social Teachings</i>				
Helping the needy is an important part of faith (agree)	96	96	96	96
Economic decisions increasing poverty are morally wrong (agree)	76	76	76	77
Catholics have duty to close gap between rich and poor (agree)	53	48	48	62
Catholics should stick to religion and not get involved in economic and political issues (disagree)	33	33	30	36

Overall, there is a trend toward lower levels of religious commitment and more diverse beliefs and practices. As a rule, Catechism Catholics are most in compliance with church teachings, followed by Council Catholics, then Christian Catholics. The biggest generation gap is between pre-Vatican II Catholics on the one hand and Vatican II and post-Vatican II Catholics on the other. Catechism Catholics are far more likely than Council Catholics and Christian Catholics are to comply with church teachings; they also are least inclined to accept unauthorized ideas that have emerged in recent years. The differences between Vatican II and post-Vatican II Catholics are smaller, but more often than not, indicate that post-Vatican II Catholics are least inclined to adhere to church norms and values.

A straight-line trend toward less commitment and more diversity is clearest in five of the eight areas we examined: pan-Vatican II practices, pre-Vatican II practices, recent ideas, recent practices, and sexual-reproductive ethics. There is a slight U-shape curve in the areas of pan-Vatican II beliefs and pre-Vatican II beliefs. In the area of social teachings, the results are mixed: there are no meaningful differences between the three cohorts on two items, but some indications of a U-shape curve on two others. In general, when there are signs of a U-shape curve, the differences between the Vatican II and post-Vatican II generations are too small to be considered statistically significant.

CONCLUSIONS

I began with three often-heard scenarios concerning the religious orientations of young Catholics: that they are not as committed to the Church and its teachings as earlier generations; that they are like previous generations and will rebound when they get married and have children of their own; and that more and more young people think the Church is important and want to embrace its teachings. After reviewing evidence from focus groups and two national studies, I believe the evidence lends more support to the first scenario than it does to either of the other two.

The biggest generation gap is between the pre-Vatican II Catholics who were born in the 1920s and '30s and both of the younger generations. Vatican II Catholics and post-Vatican II Catholics are more similar to one another than they are different. Within this context, the most accurate scenario is that Christian Catholics are increasingly inclined to reach faith and moral decisions that are not in accordance with church teachings. There are a few small signs of a rebound toward more traditional conceptions of faith and morals, but these upswings only appear on selected beliefs and almost never reach statistical significance.

There is little or no reason to believe that young Catholics will think and act just like their parents and grandparents in later stages of their

lifecourse. They have been raised in a very different society and have received a very different type of religious education. The patterns that prevail in their current beliefs and practices are likely to persist throughout their lives. Unless there are significant changes in American culture and Catholic religious formation, these patterns are also likely to become more prominent tendencies in the American Catholic Church in the years ahead.

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