Part One

THE CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXT
Chapter 1

Religious Education in Its Societal and Ecclesial Context

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Religious education in the Catholic tradition today is conducted amid great societal and ecclesial diversity in a nation and Church marked by deep wounds. Our learning and teaching take place within the societal context of a post-9/11 nation, and in the ecclesial context of a post-1/6 Church. September 11, 2001, and January 6, 2002, mark days when the sun set on a different nation and a different Church.

This paper will focus on societal and ecclesial factors which contextualize the mission of Catholic religious education in a diverse and wounded nation and Church. It will provide, in broad strokes, a panoramic view of key demographic variables from recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau in order to understand the challenges facing the nation. These data are national in scope. Regional differentiation demands that all of us locate our local reality within this wider picture. The paper will then focus on issues within the Church that challenge us profoundly as educators. And, finally, no contextualization of Church factors would be complete without an honest critique of how religious education has been perceived to have been done in the recent past in order to talk about what needs to be done better in the present and the future. That will occupy the last part of this paper.

The Societal Context

The following sociological factors are selected from my undergraduate Introduction to Sociology course at Emmanuel College. I often tell my students that this overview is like flying from Boston to Los Angeles.
It provides breadth but we have to get off the plane in order to find the depth. Similarly, while this overview will illuminate issues national, sometimes international, in scope, the question of how each is addressed in religious education programs depends in large measure on local and diocesan responses.

While we learn and teach in a global community, we will focus here on demographic variables that pertain to the United States, a complex society of over 290 million members. The Catholic Church is a large and complex organization within that national society that, in large measure, demographically mirrors the society. It is in the midst of this society that we theologize and then transmit the fruits of our theologizing to new, and sometimes not so new, generations in our religious education programs.

Our overview will focus on the variables of age, race and ethnicity, social class, and religion in order to illuminate some of the challenges that confront educators and to highlight some of the possibilities for theologizing and catechizing.

Age

First, let us examine issues related to age. The United States ranks fifteenth in the world in life expectancy. Today, life expectancy at birth is 77.3 years. Hong Kong ranks first in the world for life expectancy at 82.8 years. Japan, Australia, Canada, and several Western European nations follow Hong Kong. Much attention is paid to the factors that may enhance life expectancy, diet being one. Attention is also paid to issues related to life span, the maximum length of life possible. While there is disagreement as to the maximum, it is at least 122 years. Documentation of the age at death of Jeanne Louise Calment in France in 1997 substantiates that figure. Verifications are pending for the age at death of several Eastern Europeans which point to longer life spans.

 Longer life expectancy has led social scientists to the usage of a new term: the “graying” of America. This refers to the increasing percentage of older people in the population. Today, 13 percent of the population is over age sixty-five as compared with 4 percent in 1900. There are 7 million more elderly people in the population than there are teenagers. Demographers and policymakers warn of the need for the society to build an infrastructure to support the elderly and their caregivers as more people live into their eighties, nineties, and hundreds and become frail elders, with a variety of physical, social, psychological, and spiritual needs. As one who has provided care for elderly relatives over the last several years, I can attest from personal experience that the society is far from attaining that goal.

From the point of view of the Gospel, however, to what does the aging of America call us? How is it a blessing? What does it tell us about the fullness of human life? What does it mean for the old, for the young, and for everyone in between? What does the age distribution of the society demand of the Church?

Race and Ethnicity

The United States is becoming increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, with the youngest generations being the most diverse, and therefore, by virtue of their socialization, the most accustomed to diversity. The approximate percentages of the population by race and ethnicity are:

- Americans of European descent — 68 percent;
- Latinos — 13 percent;
- African Americans — 12 percent;
- Asian Americans — 4 percent;
- Native Americans — 1 percent;
- and Americans who claim two or more races — 1 percent.

About one-third of the population consists of people of color.

The largest groupings of Americans of European origin are German, Irish, English, and Italian. These account for approximately 40 percent of the total European American population.

Sixty-six percent of Latinos trace their ancestry to Mexico; 15 percent to Central and South America; 9 percent to Puerto Rico; 4 percent to Cuba; and 6 percent to other origins.

Twenty-four percent of Asian Americans trace their ancestry to China; 18 percent to the Philippines; 16 percent to India; 11 percent to Vietnam; 11 percent to Korea; 8 percent to Japan; and 13 percent to other origins.

Discussion about racism in the society has to take seriously the fact that institutionalized racism continues to plague the structures of reality in the United States. And the relationship of race to social class continues to be a significant one.

For religious educators, what does the changing color of the face of the United States mean for the content of religious education programs? What does racial and ethnic diversity reveal to us about God? What does the existence of individual and institutionalized racism demand of the Church?
Social Class

Today we are living in the midst of a society deeply divided along class lines, but deeply wedded to the myth of a classless society. The chasm between the rich and poor has widened greatly over the last twenty years, bringing with it a myriad of social problems due to economic inequality.

Currently the top 20 percent of the population controls 80 percent of the wealth (assets of land, stocks and bonds, etc.). The next 20 percent controls 15 percent of the wealth and the remaining 60 percent divide the remaining 5 percent of the wealth, with most people owning nothing.

There are many schemas used to describe social class. Some social scientists who study stratification use household income to rank the American population by class. One such schema follows:

The upper-upper class is made up of 1 percent of all households. Their annual income is above $1,000,000.

The lower-upper class comprises 12.4 percent of all households. Their annual income falls between $100,000 and $999,999.

The upper-middle class is made up of 22.5 percent of all households. Their annual income is between $57,500 and $99,999.

The lower-middle (or working) class comprises 22.7 percent of households and has an annual income between $20,000 and $37,499.

The lower class is made up of 22.6 percent of all households. Their annual household income is between $0 and $19,999.

This analysis of household income demonstrates that two-thirds of the society is average middle class or below — a far cry from the media characterization that a majority of Americans are in the upper-middle class.

The study of stratification demands a complex analysis, but suffice it to say that many dimensions of the issue of economic inequality are particularly troubling. One such issue is that of the “working poor,” an oxymoronic term but, unfortunately, true. They are often hidden, even in tables that analyze social class. Countless social scientists and journalists have documented the lives of men and women who work many hours per week for the minimum wage or less, with little or no benefits and who, with their families, barely survive.

What is the Gospel message to the rich, to the poor, and to those in-between? How is Christ proclaimed across class lines in the United States? Who is Christ to each of these classes? Where is the Church in a society deeply divided by class?

Religion

In addition to the age, racial, ethnic, and social class diversity described above, the United States is also marked by tremendous religious diversity. That religious diversity can be analyzed through the lens of age, race, ethnicity, and class, too.

Because of the religious pluralism in what social scientists call the “religious economy” of the United States, there is no one dominant religious body. Catholicism is the largest religious body and has been so since 1850. It currently comprises approximately 25 percent of the population (65 million people). All Protestant denominations together constitute approximately 50 percent of the population, and although some commentators say Protestantism still has a hegemonic hold on American culture, Protestantism is marked by great internal diversity as well.

The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant denomination with about 20 percent of the population as members. After Catholicism, Southern Baptists are the largest single religious body in the United States; Episcopalians and Presbyterians are relatively small denominations, comprising 2 percent and 3 percent, respectively, of the total population.

These particular denominations in America make interesting case studies of the analysis of religion, social class, and race. While the Episcopal Church and Presbyterian Church are relatively small in membership, the majority of those members come from the middle and upper classes. On the other hand, the majority of Southern Baptists come from the lower and working classes. The membership of the Southern Baptist Convention is also made up of a larger proportion of people of color than are the Episcopalian or Presbyterian churches.

Observers of religion pay particular attention to Protestant evangelicals as distinct from what is termed “mainline” or “liberal” Protestantism, especially during national elections. Scholars also trace patterns of what is called “religious switching.” This phenomenon can be traced
across religious lines but is a pattern found most often across denominational lines within Protestantism. Scholars often trace complex patterns of switching. Sometimes members switch to a denomination of a higher social class as they move into the professions. On the other hand, there are also examples of people assuming a born-again status as part of their religious identity, thus necessitating their switching to a denomination that comprises members from a social class that is lower than the denomination of origin.

But Christianity, while numerically the largest religious entity in the United States, is far from the only religious story. Like so much of the American narrative that needs to look to the world stage as backdrop, American religious pluralism must be analyzed in reference to global religious pluralism. The five major world religions are Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

There are approximately 14 million Jews in the world, with Judaism the predominant religion in Israel. The Jewish population in the United States is more than 5 million — about the same number as in Israel. American Jewish diversity is manifest in four denominations: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. The roots of American Jewish diversity lie outside the United States and are centuries old. The majority of American Jews are in the middle and upper classes. A contemporary challenge facing Judaism in this country is the high rate of intermarriage. Recent media accounts detail efforts on the part of some Jewish communities to serve as dating services to bring young Jewish adults together with the hope that they may marry.

While Judaism came to the United States in a significant way in the waves of immigration from Eastern Europe in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and after World War II, recent immigrants to the United States have brought the other world religions, along with many other religious traditions, with them. First, I consider Islam.

Islam and Catholicism are the two largest religions in the world, each with about 1 billion members. Therefore, each is demographically significant in a world of 6 billion-plus people. While Christianity is the largest world religion with approximately 1.9 billion adherents, Islam is second. Christianity is predominant; that is, in approximately 114 nations of the globe more than half the people in each nation adhere to it. Those nations are located in North and South America, Europe, southern Africa, and

Oceania. Islam is predominant in 39 nations located in the Middle East, central and northern Africa, and regions of Asia.

Demographers note that less than 1 percent of the U.S. population is Muslim, but Islamic scholars contend that even before 9/11, Muslims were reticent to state their religious identification to survey researchers for fear of reprisal. Therefore some scholars argue that the number of Muslims may, in fact, equal or even exceed the number of Jews in the United States, who represent 2 percent of the total population. Mosques are becoming more visible on the American religious landscape with a diversity of members by social class and ethnic origin. While some members are from the upper classes, many are from the lower and middle classes.

Hinduism is the world’s third largest religion, with approximately 760 million adherents, about 13 percent of the world’s population. Hinduism is predominant in three nations; India has the largest number of adherents. Hindus comprise less than 1 percent of the U.S. population.

Buddhism is the world’s fourth largest religion. It has approximately 350 million adherents, about 6 percent of the world’s population. It is the predominant religion in eight Asian nations. In the United States, less than 1 percent of the population is Buddhist, of which Asian immigrants or the children or grandchildren of immigrants make up the majority. Interestingly, though, religious switching figures here, too. Some white, middle-class Americans born into the Christian tradition have switched to Buddhism. This is primarily a West Coast phenomenon. Also, scholars note an interest in the weaving of Buddhist prayer practices within some Christian traditions in a new syncretism.

A new line of thinking has developed, too, in the analysis of world religions by demographers. Sikhism is sometimes called the fifth major organized religion because it has 20 million adherents. They are located in the state of Punjab in India. This is another case of the need for robust analytical power in the analysis of religion. While the 20 million Punjab Sikhs demographically outnumber the 14 million Jews in the world they do not hold, at this moment in history, the same place in the global sphere of influence as Judaism does in its historical and contemporary contexts and as the root of Christianity and Islam. So it is clear that a new debate will revolve around the question of what constitutes the definition of a major world religion: is it numbers, or influence, or both, or a combination of factors we have not witnessed yet in world history?
Religious diversity will increase in the United States in the years ahead. What does that mean for Catholic religious educators? What does that mean for education in a new ecumenical and interfaith national and international society? Who is Christ today? What does God look like? Is our image of God too small? How shall we teach people to pray? What does it mean to be Catholic amidst this diversity?

The Ecclesial Context

Young Adult Catholics

While the above gives us a broad sweep of key demographic variables that illuminate the sociological diversity that is the United States today, we need to deepen our analysis by locating our Catholic reality within that wider national view. To that end, we turn now to findings from our national study of young adult Catholics, and we focus on a key generation of 20 million people whose experiences of Church and society can shed light on issues that need attention by religious educators, and members of the Church more broadly, in the years ahead.

In addition to the external societal issues that are described above, it is essential that we also be mindful of the internal ecclesial issues that impact the ministry of religious education. Those issues have to do with structural and attitudinal realities of young adults in the Church.

In our study we interviewed by telephone a national sample of Catholics who had been confirmed during adolescence and were at the time of interview between the ages of 20 and 39. We collected two samples, one of Latinos and one of non-Latinos (European Americans, African Americans, and Asians). Latinos are the fastest-growing and largest ethnic group in the Church in the United States. We also collected data from dozens of individual face-to-face intensive interviews and focus group interviews across the country.

What follows are data from the telephone interviews that can be generalized to the population of confirmed young adult Catholics, the majority of that generation. We begin with the number of years of religious education. When we asked our two samples—Latinos and non-Latinos—if they had attended religious education classes in junior high and high school, 74 percent of the Latinos and 68 percent of the non-Latinos said yes. When asked if they had attended for four or more years, 59 percent of the Latinos and 73 percent of the non-Latinos answered affirmatively.

When we asked about Catholic school attendance, we received the following responses: Regarding elementary school, 50 percent of the non-Latinos had attended Catholic elementary school, as did 35 percent of the Latinos. On the secondary level, 28 percent of the non-Latinos and 15 percent of the Latinos attended Catholic high school, most of them for four years.

Smaller percentages attended Catholic college or university. Of everyone who had at least some amount of college education, 14 percent of the non-Latinos and 10 percent of the Latinos attended an institution of Catholic higher education.

We also asked about other kinds of religious programs which socialize young people in the faith. When we asked about involvement in Catholic youth ministry or youth programs while in high school, we were told the following: 16 percent of the non-Latinos said that they were often involved in them and 28 percent said they were involved occasionally. Of the Latinos, 20 percent were often involved and 22 percent were involved occasionally.

We asked those who attended college for any length of time about involvement in campus ministry or Newman Center activities. Fourteen percent of the non-Latinos and 8 percent of the Latinos had participated in such groups.

Finally, we tested for effects of Catholic education. We found that Catholic elementary school, high school, and college produced higher levels of knowledge and understanding of the Second Vatican Council. But beyond that, we could not discern any specific effects of education in Catholic schools or religious education programs.

We asked about other ecclesial issues that certainly contextualize the efforts of religious educators. They are issues that are alive in both the Church and society. (Recall that we asked these questions in the late 1990s, before the crisis in the Church moved to become national and international in its scope in January 2002.) The issues we will focus on here are gender, authority of the laity, and social justice.

First, we treat gender. Young adult Catholics have been socialized during a time of greater gender equality than was known in recent previous generations. At the same time, there are efforts to broaden the role of women in every social institution, religion included. One of the most
startling findings of the study, and one that has far-reaching implications for religious education for younger people is that, of the non-Latino young adults who had married at the time of our study, 50 percent married someone who was not a Catholic. One of several implications of this finding is that many young adults and their children have been and will be ministered to by women clergy of other faith traditions. So the increasing presence of women in significant roles in politics, media, health care, business, and religion in the United States has been a strong socializing force in the lives of many young adults in the last couple of decades.

We posed the following statements to measure attitudes about gender:

- It is important that the Catholic Church put more women in positions of leadership and authority. Seventy-five percent of both the Latinos and non-Latinos agreed.
- The Catholic Church should allow women greater participation in all ministries. Eighty-seven percent of both the Latinos and non-Latinos agreed.

The findings reveal a strong and favorable attitude toward greater participation of women in ministry, authority, and leadership in the Church, which is consistent across ethnic groupings in our study.

Second, we discuss the laity. Since the crisis in the Church began to unfold in 2002, there have been calls for greater lay involvement in the Church. Voice of the Faithful is the most obvious example of the organized laity as it calls for support of the abused, support of priests of integrity, and for structural change in the Church. Voice of the Faithful and other lay reform groups study the documents of the Second Vatican Council and more recent decrees in order to better assume their role within the structures of the Church.

We put forward several statements and questions to ascertain the attitudes of the young adults toward the laity:

- Lay people are just as important a part of the Church as priests are. Ninety-one percent of Latinos and 88 percent of non-Latinos agreed.
- The Catholic Church should facilitate discussion and debate by the laity on doctrinal issues such as divorce, remarriage, and human sexuality. Seventy-nine percent of Latinos and 80 percent of non-Latinos agreed.
- Do you favor or oppose more lay involvement in Church affairs at the local parish level, on matters that do not involve questions of faith and morals? Of the Latinos, 59 percent were in favor, 16 percent were opposed, and 25 percent were unsure. Of the non-Latinos, 71 percent were in favor, 10 percent were opposed, and 19 percent were unsure.

The findings indicate that the notion that the priesthood is a higher state than the lay state is not accepted by the vast majority of young adults. It is also clear that the Church is being called by a large majority of young adults to discuss and debate doctrinal issues that have caused great pain in the lives of some young adults and in their families and that pertain to dimensions of human sexuality, divorce, and remarriage. Both of these findings indicate no difference between ethnic groupings.

The last finding points to a difference in attitude between Latinos and non-Latinos regarding local parish life, with more non-Latinos than Latinos favoring more lay involvement in Church affairs at the local level. It should be noted that a majority of both groups favor lay involvement. The difference, and the fairly large number in both groups who indicated that they were unsure, may be due to the lack of exposure to models of lay involvement in the local area. As the priest shortage escalates in the next few years due to the retirement, illnesses, and deaths of the generation of priests formed during the Second Vatican Council, a broader experience of lay involvement in parish life will be normative for more Catholics, even in urban areas which had large numbers of priests in the past.

Finally, let us consider social justice issues. These statements point to the complexity of young adult Catholic thinking with regard to the implementation of the social mission of the Church. We posed the following statements:

- The Church should stick to religion and not be involved in economic or political issues. Fifty-two percent of Latinos and 54 percent of non-Latinos agreed.
- I take seriously the pronouncements of the Pope on social, political, and moral issues. Sixty-five percent of Latinos and 59 percent of non-Latinos agreed.
- Catholics have a duty to try to end racism. Ninety percent of the Latinos and 86 percent of the non-Latinos agreed.
Catholics have a duty to try to close the gap between the rich and the poor. Eighty-three percent of Latinos and 76 percent of non-Latinos agreed.

Catholics have a duty to try to live more simply in order to preserve the environment. Eighty percent of Latinos and 73 percent of non-Latinos agreed.

These findings point to a few dimensions of a critical issue for Catholicism.

The first finding points to a key polarity: half of the young adult Catholics believe that the Church should stay out of economic and political issues and the other half feel that they should not. A somewhat higher percentage states that it takes seriously the Pope’s pronouncements on social, political, and moral issues. And a large percentage say that Catholics have a duty to end racism, close the gap between the rich and the poor, and live more simply for the sake of the environment. On the whole, Catholics are supportive of a progressive social agenda, through acts of charity and through work for social justice. It is how and why the Church interfaces with the state that are the tension points for some Catholics. Further research is needed on this timely, complex, and crucial topic.

Religious Education

Religious education is also part of the ecclesial context that must be examined here. In our in-depth interviews with young adult Catholics across the nation the following phrases were used to characterize their experience of their own religious education:

- The pedagogy was horrible.
- Teachers aren’t prepared.
- Too rote, too mechanical.
- Nothing in depth, just Jesus is love.
- We got “God loves you” but not much else.
- No content; touchy-feely.
- Insufficient.
- Silly.
- I was confirmed and had no idea of what was going on.
- A baby-sitting session.
- More social than anything else.
- By and large, my religious education was abysmal.
- Emphasis was on social issues.
- We played biblical Trivial Pursuit.

We heard these comments, and others like them, spoken by young adult Catholics, then in their 20s and 30s, in the late 1990s all around the United States. Sometimes they were said with humor, sometimes with anger. I found the critique of religious education to be one of the most powerful findings for me in all of the research we conducted because of its profound generational consequences for the mission of the Church and for the faith life of individual Catholics.

All kinds of challenges are contained therein. First among them is that many of the teachers of religious education today come from the generation that feels it received such poor quality religious education themselves. The response of the Church to their need for pedagogy is critical for the passing on of the faith to their children. The young adults remain a key bridge to the future and because of their generational size and generational place their experience cannot be taken lightly.

It remains to be seen by other survey researchers twenty years hence what the perception of the next generation, the children of today, will be regarding their religious education. Today, we have impressionistic evidence of religious education efforts in particular parishes or dioceses, but we cannot generalize from these experiences to the national level. It would serve the Church well to do the kind of evaluation research and assessment that is needed to determine the efficacy of religious education efforts on a wide scale.

In order to accomplish that, a fundamental premise must be that if we intend to ask a question, we must be willing to hear the answer. This can be difficult, especially if one is concerned about something that is valued deeply. And it can be difficult if the responses are challenging to the status quo. In our focus groups and individual interviews we heard many challenging statements. In particular, I remember meeting a young man years before we conducted this research who summed up his religious education with this sentence: “I needed meat and the Church gave me
Twinkies.” Years later I heard variations of that theme over and over again as I heard hundreds of people describe the meaninglessness of arts and crafts activities, the lack of content in their class work, the poor quality of the teaching, the lack of connection to the deep structures of the faith.

Some could go on after the joking to express satisfaction with one or more dimensions of their religious education but others could not. Some expressed anger after they joked about their experience. Anger, as one young woman said, at being set up by the Church. Three examples of this follow. One woman said that she went to a public university with a very active Campus Crusade for Christ and was embarrassed in front of her evangelical friends by her lack of knowledge of the Scriptures. She wanted to know why a course in the Bible was not part of her religious education.

Another young woman talked about her workplace and the religious diversity that was present there. She said that she is embarrassed when she is asked questions about her faith and she cannot answer them. She said that a lot of her time in religious education was spent in cutting out pictures from magazines and gluing them to cardboard in order to make collages. I believe that the image of the collage is the metaphor for the religious education of many in this generation: a one-dimensional piece with a mish-mash of color and shape with no structure, no depth, and no meaning.

A young man who married a woman from another faith tradition is embarrassed in front of his in-laws when they can articulate their tradition so easily. He is hard put to answer some of the fundamental questions they ask him about the symbols of the Catholic Church, about the liturgical seasons, about the saints.

This is the sociological diversity I talked about earlier — the places that many young Catholics will spend their lives — a public university, an ecumenical and interfaith workplace, a marriage to a spouse of another faith tradition or no faith tradition.

We concluded our book with ten recommendations to the Church regarding ministry to young adults including the Church making a “preferential option” for young adults; promoting a distinct Catholic identity; building Catholic identity in a positive way; enhancing the liturgical context; building better community; offering better marriage preparation; supporting more recruitment to the priesthood, religious life, and lay ministry; teaching about spirituality, prayer, and meditation; supporting young adult Catholic initiatives; and, providing better young adult religious education. On this last point, I quote our recommendation verbatim:

There is a critical need for credible and relevant adult religious education. As one young adult observed, “The Church settles for less than the best.” This is especially true in three areas: Bible study, Vatican II theology, and the Church’s social teachings.

Disputation over Vatican II’s meaning and implementation is an undercurrent in the contemporary Church. It is still a source of polarization and division among Catholics. Yet many young adult Catholics know little about the Council, its deliberations, documents and theology, and what is known is piecemeal and superficial. A respondent’s comment that, “My understanding of the Vatican Council was it made the Latin Mass become non-Latin and...changed some of the words in prayers,” is emblematic of the situation. This is a serious lacuna in Catholic life today — as is the general lack of knowledge regarding Catholic social teachings since Vatican II.

The three areas — Bible, Vatican II, and social teachings — need to be addressed with programs that are intellectually edifying and challenging, action-oriented, community building, and helpful for integrating young Catholics into parish life. Many young adult Catholics are eager for instruction in their faith and will prove receptive to initiatives.

The problem of Catholic young adult religious education transcends the issues of content and development of curriculum; it is also one of pedagogy. Greater attention needs to be given to the training of teachers and those involved in young adult education. Resources should be directed to these ends, along with the development of youth groups, community service projects, and retreat programs which implement these teachings.

Those words were published in 2001. Today, in a Church that continues to bleed from multiple wounds, and in a world yearning for justice, peace, and reconciliation, the mission of religious education in the Church seems to be even more necessary for the spreading of the
Gospel. How shall we respond? I believe that there should be three principles to which we are committed:

First, we need a commitment to excellence. The word “mediocre” was used again and again in regard to religious education. When asked if they had ever heard of the Second Vatican Council only 29 percent of the Latinos and 54 percent of the non-Latinos said yes. When those who said yes were asked if they had ever read about or discussed any of the ideas of the Second Vatican Council, only half said yes. We cannot accept this kind of systemic failure.

Second, we must have a willingness to be critiqued by this generation of young adults. Some men and women who are professionals in their fields in this generation consider themselves to be religious illiterates. Others in a variety of jobs and lifestyles say that when they faced struggle and sorrow, they had not been given a lot of help in their faith development. Are we willing to listen non-defensively to a perhaps painful critique in order for new ideas, new creativity, new vision, new energy to be unleashed by people who experienced religious education in this generation, who hope for a more substantive and meaningful religious education for their children, and who echo one respondent who does not see substantive change on the local level and says, “We can do better than this”? Denial can run deep and efforts to minimize these findings, or to say that they are not as widespread as they are, or that everything is fine now, will only delay the needed reform for tens of millions of young adult and young Catholics in this country.

Third, we must make a commitment to broadening and deepening what is working well and renewing efforts to change what is not. In our study, there were points of strength that were articulated by respondents: retreats, community service, and the witness of individual teachers. Can we learn retrospectively from what people hold dear now, from what they continue to be inspired by, from what continues to sustain them, from what moved them to further reflection or action, from what kept them in relationship with God and with the Church?

So much hinges, individually and institutionally, on the transmission of the faith. Families have a profound responsibility for this mission but are not always up to the task.

A great responsibility rests on the pedagogy and content of religious education. Continued involvement in the life of the Church can flow from it. One college senior discussed the consequences:

It was too vague. I would hesitate to call it teaching or learning. I don’t think much was taught, and I certainly don’t think much was learned from my perspective. I think my lack of knowledge is what made me disinterested in the Catholic Church.

Let me conclude this paper with a personal word. I was thirty-nine years of age when I began the research project on young adults. So I was a member, albeit at the tail end, of the generation I was studying. The stories I heard brought my own experiences of religious education back to me, sometimes on a daily basis. In my memory I could recall my classmates and me making collages year after year. I still do not know why we made them. But as one who was fortunate to receive more meat than Twinkies in her post-Vatican II religious education, I would say that second to my family, those teachers who gave me my religious education made all the difference in my life. Their meat gave me life-giving sustenance. For the sake of a changing world and a changing Church and in a society with such a deep spiritual hunger, I hope that when the next generation of Catholics is surveyed that they can say the same.