Chapter 2

Faith, Hope, and (Excessive) Individualism

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My presentation in this chapter is straightforward. I will address a dynamic of American society rife with promise and peril for the transmission of faith. It is a relatively easy target, and one about which much has already been written. This is the dynamic of individualism (or, perhaps I should say “excessive” individualism) that is at the core of the American ethos, and that is now an increasingly significant element of American Catholic identity.

The genesis (and apotheosis) of American individualism is varied and complex, but stems in large part from the genius of Protestantism and its hegemonic influence in shaping what Robert Bellah has called the American “cultural code.” Individualism has deep roots in Protestant theological sources, notably in the emphasis on the sacredness of individual conscience and, in more extreme expressions, in a near “divinization of the Self.”

Beyond the influences of Protestantism, postmodern cultural patterns also accentuate individualism, especially among the more affluent social classes that include growing numbers of American Catholics.

“Identity” in the postmodern context has increasingly become a self-constructed project. In the context of pluralism and the radical openness of social life, the synthesis of global culture, and the eclectic mixing and diversity of various “authorities,” achievement and autonomy become primary determinants of identity. Ascribed statuses and inherited relations wane in significance. Anthony Giddens, for example, notes that in the highly pluralistic, multicultural, and fragmented milieu of postmodernity, the self is a more deliberative and reflexive project.

Individuals try to negotiate and sustain a coherent, yet continuously revised biographical narrative within a context of multiple choices filtered through various abstractions and social systems. Charles Taylor has also explored the shift toward a more radical individualism with its ethic of authenticity and moral and spiritual instrumentalism, most recently in his reexamination of the thought of William James. According to Taylor, the impact of individualism on religion means that there is no “necessary embedding of our link to the sacred in any particular broader framework, whether ‘church’ or ‘state.’” Today it is simply axiomatic that one should never conform to some external authority that doesn’t seem comprehensive as a form of spiritual life, or that does not ring true to the dictates of one’s own inner sense of self.

Within this identity-as-self-construction paradigm with its more psychological and dynamic conception of the self, religion readily transforms into a “private affair,” one segment of identity work in which the individual selects a world of meaning and significance from a variety of choices. As Thomas Luckmann observed some time ago, one of the most revolutionary traits of (post) modern society is that personal identity becomes essentially, a “private phenomenon.” These choices, however, receive little or no support from the primary institutions of society. In addition, the role of traditional patterns of authority is seriously attenuated as vertical authority yields to horizontal authority and as these patterns — including those of religious authority — are perceived as only one form of authority among others, that is, parts of the indefinite pluralism of expertise in the postmodern context.

A related dynamic that accentuates individualism and that weds religion to the free market is that of “cultural commodification.” By cultural commodification I mean the totality of social, cultural, and psychological factors surrounding the objectification and consumption of religious symbols, narratives, practices, and spiritual wares.

Consumer capitalism’s cultural impact on religion is profound. One of its most significant effects is in moving the locus of the sacred from traditional religious institutions into the realm of the marketplace, thereby transforming religion into another “cultural resource” for individual consumption. This dynamic of commodification, which divorces religious symbols and practices from traditional community contexts, readily facilitates the construction of an individualized religious identity.
Some of the tendencies toward religious commodification come from within religion itself. In the American culture of religious voluntarism, it is hardly surprising that matters of the soul must be "sold," or that church "shopping" is pervasive. The problem, however, runs much deeper than one of denominational marketing imperatives.

In the postmodern context, it is increasingly difficult for religious traditions to control their meaning systems. Religious symbols and practices, like aesthetic ones, are highly vulnerable to cooptation, bricolage, and mass commodification. Unlike many commercial institutions that employ the full power of civil law to protect the integrity of their corporate symbols, religious institutions exercise little normative control over theirs. Religious symbols are readily dislodged from their historic connection with a theological tradition, a moral ethic, a disciplined community, or with a distinct religious identity. They become fragmented into the commercial and pop culture milieus where they are easily vulgarized, stripped of depth, and reduced to decorative functions, or to patterns of entertainment and "life-style" enhancement. Significantly, this dislodging occurs in a social context in which individuals are encouraged to pursue an "affluence ethic" devoted to consuming a greater variety of things and where, as Vincent Miller observes, they are also deprived of communal and traditional sources of identity while simultaneously being enticed by the mass media to invest in commodity-based self-enhancements. Buy "this" and you can become "that."

The issue I am raising here is not whether or not religious symbols sustain power to evoke the sacred. They can and do — sometimes in surprising and creative ways, especially among the young. It is rather that these symbols are increasingly promoted as yet another consumer product and transformed into yet another venue for the exercise of the self-justifying virtue of "choice." They are abstracted from their interrelationship with other symbols, beliefs, and practices that determine their meaning and function in their traditional context. They become more fluid and ambiguous. As such, they are less helpful as group signifiers, less compelling in shaping individual lives, and less capable of challenging the status quo. Divorced from group- and culture-specific contexts, religious symbols are easily conformed to the values and practices of the dominant culture. They can be deployed in the service of virtually any interest-group or ideal and are especially vulnerable to cooptation by the entertainment and therapeutic domains. Religious institutions, in turn, increasingly compete with therapists, popular writers, academics, and talk-show hosts and entertainers for the meaning and interpretation of their spiritual traditions.

**Religious Individualism in America**

Religious individualism in America has many hybrids and has been labeled various things — the privatization of religion, religious disestablishment, the new voluntarism, do-it-yourself-religiosity, Sheilism, personal religion, post-denominationalism, and so forth. Studies inaugurated by Robert Bellah and colleagues in *Habits of the Heart* (1985), along with the work by Robert Wuthnow in *Acts of Compassion* (1991) and in subsequent research on small groups have focused attention on the negative relationship between individualism and commitment in American life — as do Robert Putnam's well-known probings in this regard. This research on disengagement in the civic sphere points to a parallel displacement of communal and tradition-centered beliefs and practices by more privatized and individualist ones in the religious sphere. Privatized religiosity — which easily accommodates the utilitarian and expressive individualism of American culture — makes it difficult to articulate and sustain religious commitments. Specifically, religious individualism has been linked with autonomy in the moral realm; with the diminution or rejection of ecclesial authority; with more direct access to the sacred; with a higher priority for personal spiritual fulfillment; and with a privatized spirituality only loosely connected with established traditions. In short, with what Wuthnow calls "me-first" religion.

What I want to emphasize here is not simply that religious individualism means that religious identity is more autonomous and deliberate today; it is that this individualism signals a loss of how religion is anchored in a sense of belonging. The issue is the decline in connectedness; a weakening or severing of the *social* basis of religion in family, marriage, ethnicity, and community; a decline in the perceived *necessity* of communal or institutional structures as constituent of religious identity. Outside of more fundamentalist-like enclaves, religious identity today is not only less bounded by doctrine or creed; it is also less nurtured and reinforced by community. This trend has serious implications for Catholicism.
I am not denying, of course, that religion in America has a social or institutional face. It obviously does. Denominational structures are the primary expression of religion’s social presence. A higher percentage of people are affiliated with a church today than at any other time in American history. Excellent parishes and vital congregations — especially some of the “new immigrant” ones — can be found in many parts of the country. The majority of Americans continue to experience religion in some type of social context. Nevertheless, a body of cumulative research points to a weakening of the social sources of religious identity, a process not entirely compensated for by the emergence of alternative “lifestyle enclaves.” The number of Americans wholly uninvolved with a church has gradually increased as religious institutions have lost much of their monopoly over the quest for the sacred. Other developments also mark these trends.

To begin with, the broader cultural Gestalt reflects a steady decline in the legitimacy of institutional authority of any kind — contributing to what Robert Wuthnow has described as a society of “loose connections.” “Loose connections” are both cause and effect of “porous institutions” (including religious ones) that do not hold individuals very securely. Thus the loss of legitimacy by religious institutions is part of the broader problem of widespread alienation from all authoritative institutions that has occurred in American society. Second and more explicitly, an increasing number of Americans report their religious identity as a “personal religion” or “none.” Religious “nones” now constitute about 14 percent of the adult population. Gallup polls show that seven in ten Americans believe that one can be religious without going to church. And over three-quarters of Americans believe that a person should come to his or her moral values independent of what the person’s church, synagogue, or mosque may say. Almost 40 percent of Americans have no connection with organized religion.

A third and highly significant marker of the de-institutionalization of religion is its uncoupling from “spirituality.” Significant numbers of Americans, especially baby boomers, see little necessary connection between being spiritual and being part of a historic tradition, or part of a disciplined community of faith.

We live in an era of widespread religionless spirituality. The popular mantra is: “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” Wuthnow has charted this uncoupling process, notably the replacement since the 1950s of “habitation spirituality” associated with formal institutions, by a “spirituality of seeking” associated with individual exploration. In contemporary parlance, “religion” is often a dirty word laden with a host of negative connotations — institutionalism, bureaucracy, hierarchy, doctrines, dogmas, creeds, sexism, patriarchy, and boring rituals — and who wants any part of this?! (In the Catholic context, we now also have a heightened association of the term with sexual abuse, callousness, secrecy, and administrative malfeasance.) The default option for many individuals today is a vague and nonspecific “spirituality.” The satisfaction of this “spirituality” fuels the “spiritual seeker” syndrome and finds widespread expression in the generic discourse of “faith journey” or “individual growth.”

The uncoupling of spirituality from religion is also reinforced by the mass media’s not-so-subtle message that you don’t need a religious community to engage “God issues.” For all of the Religious Right’s inveighing against America’s “secular” media, many movies and television programs promote morality themes and treat spiritual and supernatural ones. They do so, however, in ways that avoid traditional religious venues. As TV Guide recently declared, “Transcendental television” is here — and we’re not talking about Sally Fields as The Flying Nun. Shows such as Joan of Arcadia, Tru Calling, Six Feet Under, Crossing Over, and Wonderfalls expose viewers to themes of supernaturalism, spirituality, and “higher powers.” They do this, however, in non-specific ways unassociated with traditional religion or with traditional religious communities. (As even “God” responded in the first Joan of Arcadia episode to Joan’s assertion that she was “not religious”: “It’s not about religion, Joan. It’s about fulfilling your true nature.”) Given the power of the mass media in shaping the religious and cultural imagination, particularly among Gen X and Millennial youth, this is hardly an insignificant message.

A fourth factor illustrating the trend toward religious individualism is that much of the “new religious consciousness” associated with the flowering of religious movements since the 1960s preaches individualism. Pragmatically, the focus of many of these movements, especially the quasi-therapeutic and self-help ones that arose in the wake of the “Age of Aquarius,” has been on what they can do for the individual, and only
secondarily on religion’s social sources or connections, or on its benefits for the broader social environment.

Finally, I note that some of the most vibrant forms of religion in America today — the mega-church or seeker-church phenomenon, along with evangelicalism in general — accentuate religious individualism. These movements are not characterized by a strong institutional identity, or by a strong ecclesiology or theology of church. They emphasize individual spiritual empowerment and a subjectivist and therapeutic understanding of religious participation. As Sargeant, Miller, and others have pointed out, while these churches have obvious institutional structures and dynamics, they appeal primarily because of their “consumer friendly” satisfaction of individual needs, not because of their communal or social ecclesiology.

Other scholars of contemporary religion echo themes of choice, autonomy, and individualism in American religious life. Religious identity, like other kinds of identity, recapitulates the motif of choice in both the democratic political process and in the consumer marketplace. Christian Smith observes:

For moderns...the ultimate criterion of identity and lifestyle validity is individual choice. It is by choosing a product, a mate, a lifestyle, or an identity that one makes it one’s very own, personal, special, and meaningful—not “merely” something one inherits or assumes.

As the level of individualism has risen, many in the religious mainstream have come to believe that church going and church authority are optional. Nominal membership increasingly replaces active involvement, a development paralleling national civic trends. Fewer Americans are spending time in church-related endeavors. Religion is less perceived as an inherited phenomenon, or as a binding community of discipleship and obligation. Religious leaders and institutions, which traditionally provided the framework within which religious meaning was constructed, have become increasingly peripheral to the spirituality and “lived religion” of private personal enterprise.

Alan Wolfe in his recent book, The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith (2003), reiterates the pervasiveness of this trend. Wolfe shows that even when people speak of their relationship to a church, it is not typically in terms of its rules and requirements and ecclesiastical structures per se, but in terms of their personal spiritual needs in this regard.

Religious Individualism and Catholicism

Signs that growing numbers of American Catholics have embraced an individualist approach to faith and religious identity are obvious. It is long since passé to observe that many Catholics (on both the left and right of the ecclesial spectrum) make up their own minds about an array of beliefs and practices in the Church. Contemporary Catholic identity is fluid, porous, and indeterminate. The Church’s authority structure and social cohesion have weakened. Historical and distinctive Catholic cultural patterns have declined or disappeared. Nor is this loosening of Catholic identity confined to the realm of popular religiosity — where institutional and normative authorities in the Church have always had weak and limited impact. Where Catholics embrace the tradition today, many do so selectively and by choice, rather than by necessity or conformity. Although new patterns of community are emerging within Catholicism (small faith communities; so-called “lay movements”) the prevailing trend is toward weakened communal and institutional attachments and lower levels of commitment and participation.

As we observed in our study of young adult Catholics — and as the culture of commodified religion mandates — the tradition for many Catholics today is not so much a binding community of discipleship and obligation as a toolkit of sacred wares for selectively constructing a personal spiritual identity. This is especially true of post-Vatican II Catholics, in spite of their preferences for remaining Catholic and their alleged adherence to “core” doctrines of the faith. And, while younger Catholics may be attracted to or enamored by Catholic “stuff,” or by Catholic-specific identity markers (spiritual traditions, the pope, rituals), this attraction does not necessarily translate into an embrace of the institutional Church and its structures of authority. Other indicators are also relevant.

As noted, it is increasingly difficult for the hierarchy to force compliance behavior outside of the Church’s own institutional infrastructure. Consider Mass attendance, a central expression of Catholic sacramentalism, ritualized solidarity, and an obvious public marker of Catholic identity.
In spite of official admonitions to the contrary ("obliged in conscience," "grievous sin"), significant numbers of Catholics disregard the seriousness of missing Mass. Regular Sunday attendance runs only in the 25 to 30 percent range. Even more revealing, nearly 64 percent of Catholics agree with the statement, "You can be a good Catholic without going to Mass" — a conviction that surely poses questions about Catholic communal sensibilities, institutional attachment, and the durability of a sacramental "Catholic imagination."

Studies also show that significant numbers of Catholics are only marginally or occasionally connected to other elements of the Church's institutional and sacramental life. Claims of a "return to orthodoxy" notwithstanding, young adult Catholics, in particular, have loose connections with institutional Catholicism. For many — in a revealing symbolic shift in identity construction — the appellation "Christian" has come to qualify or supplant "Catholic" as a first-term indicator of their religious identity. Although most American Catholics have no intention of leaving the Church, the numbers who see it as important in their lives have gradually declined, as have overall levels of religious practice. Those actually involved in parish life outside of parochial school connections and Sunday liturgies also remain relatively small. In our study of young adults, only 17 percent had been active in any group or committee in their parish or in another Catholic group in the last six months; nearly 25 percent were not registered in any parish. In addition, few individuals had overlapping memberships in Catholic organizations that would work to reinforce Catholic identity. Little wonder that post-Vatican II Catholics rank the "spirit of community among Catholics" lower than other religious groups. Other venues of social connectedness among Catholics have also diminished. Catholic enrollment in Catholic educational institutions at all levels has declined, as has the number of Catholic professional organizations and apostolic associations. The number of Catholics embracing religious life (a distinct but preeminent expression of Catholic communalism) has also shrunk significantly.

The destabilization of Catholic family life — following broader cultural patterns of marriage and divorce — is also relevant to Catholicism's weakening social ecology. Outside of its celibate ranks, Catholicism has traditionally been based on the two-parent, heterosexual, nuclear family. As more Catholics are raised in single-parent, blended, or otherwise nontraditional families, exposure to formalized Catholic social patterns will likely decline. In addition, nearly half of all non-Latino Catholic marriages are now to non-Catholics. This trend, along with increasing numbers of "irregular" Catholic marriages (Catholics to Catholics outside the Church) and divorce rates paralleling national trends, will have serious long-term implications for Catholic solidarity and identity. Catholic social and institutional ties have also been weakened by broader mobility dynamics, by the demise of dense neighborhood networks among Catholics, and by the presence of more differentiated age cohorts within the Church — a reality that makes religious socialization more challenging. The erosion of Catholicism's social basis is also related to ethnic dynamics.

Ethnicity once created a complex social ecology that reinforced Catholic identity. That impact, especially among Euro-American Catholics, has been greatly diminished today. I take it as self-evident that in the case of Latinos and Asian "new immigrant" Catholics, a relatively tight bond exists between ethnic and religious identity. New immigrants see their religion as a primary means of preserving their cultural heritage and particularity. Among Euro-American Catholics, however, it is far less clear that ethnicity now operates as anything more than a residual carrier of Catholic identity.

The social networks of most Euro-American Catholics today are multiple and hardly confined to the ethnic group. Regional variations notwithstanding, ethnic societies and associations have declined. The so-called "new ethnic consciousness" that arose in reaction to the Civil Rights Movement was short-lived and essentially over as a self-conscious movement by the late 1980s. Most of the Euro-American ethnic-based forms of folk theology, piety, and devotionalism have disappeared, or continue to decline. In addition, studies such as Davidson's (1997) show that generational or cohort effect is a stronger predictor of Catholic belief and practice than race or ethnicity. Another dynamic also erodes the oneness of ethnicity and religion.

The postmodern milieu is a "multicultural" one. Multiculturalism can mean the promotion of ethnic pride and group identity, the heightening of cultural boundaries and differentiation or, in more exaggerated forms, ethnic separatism.

Paradoxically, however, multiculturalism can also signal a "post-ethnic" sensibility. Cultural fluidity today means that cultural identities
(like religious ones) are increasingly adopted, exchanged, and shed. Individuals can lay claim to multiple identities with varying degrees of commitment to each depending on the psychic economy of the individual relative to evolving circumstances. As Mayer and his co-authors note in their studies of Jewish identity, in such an environment it is difficult to speak of anyone’s identity as a permanent fixture of the self.59 For growing numbers of Americans, individual identity is a function of cultural preference rather than race or ethnicity per se; post-ethnic young adults eschew identifying exclusively with any group or race. They refuse to claim a single cultural or racial identity. The rising numbers of mixed-race marriages, along with the generational decline of native languages are but two of the more obvious causes and consequences of these trends.60 Another is an alteration in the interplay of religion and ethnicity, especially the role of the latter in reinforcing the former.

A final factor to which I want to draw brief attention as an illustration of the individualist impulse among American Catholics is an emerging evangelical temper. David J. O’Brien pointed to this trend over a decade ago and linked it to the “realities of voluntarism” influencing American Catholics.61 William Portier has recently written a lengthy and subtle exploration of the topic.62 The aspect of evangelicalism with which I am concerned here is not its emphasis on personal conversion, subjective emotionalism, public witness, belief in biblical literacy, or its potential for sectarianism; it is evangelicalism’s accentuation of the primacy of the individual’s relationship to the divine.

Like O’Brien, Portier roots the emergence of Catholic evangelicalism in the cultural embrace of American religious voluntarism following the demise of the Catholic ethnic subculture. Portier emphasizes that until early in the second half of the twentieth century, an extensive immigrant subculture buffered American Catholics from the full effects of religious voluntarism. Predictably, the dissolution of that subculture has led to the emergence of more evangelical forms of Catholicism — especially in the context of American pluralism and as the social, demographic, and behavioral differences between Catholics and other Americans have evaporated. Vatican II accelerated these trends. However, the dissolution of the subculture and not the Council per se is the more significant factor. Portier contends — and I concur — that the pressing issue today is how to be Catholic under the full weight of America’s voluntaristic and pluralistic milieu minus this subculture.63

The concern I want to voice here is that this “evangelical impulse” harbors an anti-institutional bias. As Portier puts it, while Catholic evangelicalism may promise a religious revival, “the evangelical Catholic future simultaneously threatens church unity with consumerist individualism.”64 As Miller illustrated in his study of the new paradigm churches, the issue for many individuals today is not denominational affiliation; it is, “Is Christ living in you?”65 Given Catholicism’s current institutional weakness, the decline of its ethnic sources, and the tenuous connection of many of the young to it, “Jesus” or a “personal relationship with the Lord” holds the allure of becoming more popular than the Church and, following broader cultural patterns, de facto replacing it — for at least some American Catholics.66

Conclusion

To be Catholic is to be part of a community. In Vincent Miller’s adept phrase, it is a “work of community over time.”67 Catholicism is not an individual appropriation driven by self-interest, or a purely private one — even where, in a deep existential sense, Catholic identity (like all authentic religious identity) requires personal self-appropriation. To be Catholic is to be communal, institution- and tradition-centered. It is to be a communio, to be one in Christ and united in the bonds of human love and community. It is to be social.

Over the last half century, individualism has become a more conspicuous feature of Catholic religious self-understanding. Catholicism’s institutional identity has become weaker, more diffused, and less salient to American Catholics. Many live today as self-defined Catholics without depending on the Church for normative authority to do so. They practice more of a consumer Catholicism than an institutionally validated one. Furthermore, many Catholics, especially post-Vatican II ones, have had fewer experiences of Catholicism, not only as a coherent symbol and linguistic system, but also as a vibrant social reality of groups, organizations, and associations.

Like Bellah and others, my comments about American individualism have emphasized its corrosive impact on community. Individualism among American Catholics, however, is not an entirely negative development.68 I take the influence as positive when it is associated with personal maturity, with a sense of “ownership” and critical appropriation of the
faith, and where it illustrates a laity rightfully acting as producers as well as consumers of the tradition. However lay agency is related to the cultural currents of American individualism, it is also theologically legitimized in the Vatican II emphasis on the dignity of the human person, respect for the primacy of informed conscience, the compatibility of faith and reason, the necessity of an enculturated Catholic identity, and the emphasis on a living faith relevant to a particular social and historical context. Lay agency is also integral to the “universal call to holiness” (Lumen gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, #39) and to the recognition that there are diversely legitimate ways of being Catholic.

My concern here, however, is with the weakening of Catholic social structures and community ties—beyond the demise of the ethnic subculture with which this loss is usually linked. Fewer Catholics experience social solidarity with other Catholics in ways that would reinforce a strong Catholic identity. Fewer experience the tradition as a social reality. Catholic identity is not consistently reinforced by ritualized solidarity. While there are exceptionally good parishes, participation rates in many parish programs are low. Many Catholics do not invest significant amounts of time and energy in parish life. Their spirituality is parish-formed or parish-bound in only limited ways. These developments—compounded by the influence of religious individualism, privatization, and cultural commodification—represent a serious fracture of Catholicism’s social ecology, a “hollowing out” of the experience of Catholicism qua community. They pose obvious challenges to the maintenance of a “Catholic ethic,” a “Catholic imagination,” and to Catholicism’s possibilities as a vital tradition capable of engaging and transforming the culture. Minus the experience of Catholicism as a vibrant social reality (symbolically understood in the imagery of the “Body of Christ”), young Catholics are less likely to be successfully socialized into the tradition, less likely to find it compelling, less likely to have a bounded sense of identity, less likely to develop a Catholic vocabulary to interpret their experiences, and less likely to find the tradition’s plausibility structures credible.

I assert that “Handing on the Faith” today is not a purely cognitive task. It is not solely the passing on of a formulaic “content.” Nor is it a nostalgic exercise for a lost world, or a matter of configuring the tradition so that it might appeal as another “life-style enclave.”

The task is a profoundly sociological one. It means addressing the atrophy of communal participation and the need for a socially embedded Catholicism. It includes the creative (re)construction and intensification of Catholicism as a communal reality of habit, prayer, reflection, dialogue, and debate. It necessitates the (re)creation of more cohesive social bonds, shared memories, mutual responsibilities, permanent relationships, and other experiences of connectedness. The problem today is not only that younger Catholics have not had passed on to them a good synthesis of the old and new Catholicism so that they might do a discerning engagement of the culture. It is that they (and many older Catholics as well) see less connection between “faith” and church or community. Too often their experience of Catholicism as a social reality that actualizes an ecclesial reality intrinsic to their identity as Catholics remains impoverished.

Young people must have opportunities for involvement in the structures of the Church, and for the creation of their own structures for sharing their gifts and talents. They must be socially anchored (ministries, associations, societies, prayer, and formation groups) as Catholics. Minus such experience, it is not clear how their commitment will be maintained in other than anemic ways. Nor is it clear how effectively Catholic spirituality and Church teachings rooted in a social vision and sensibility—the common good, the importance of solidarity, international relations, and social responsibility—can be sustained.

Parish life, small faith communities, and the liturgy are obviously means for meeting the need for greater Catholic communal solidarity. In the wake of the postconciliar dissipation of other Catholic social structures the liturgy, in particular, has increasingly carried the burden of meeting this need. This is a necessary and legitimate function of the liturgy. It is not, however, its sole function and will be inadequate minus other supporting experiences of church and community building.

“Handing on the Faith” in a culture of individualism, choice, and an unfettered market economy is a daunting task. To be successful, it must be attended by a “handing on (of) the community.”