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Unlikely Signs: Hope in a Culture of Optimism

INTRODUCTION: HOPE AND OPTIMISM

In a time of papal transitions, overseas wars, questions about the economy and social security, when the Church in the United States is still emerging from a disheartening three-year-old scandal, I have found that Catholics in the U.S. are clamoring for hope.¹ Yet for the dominant culture in our country, hope remains a puzzling thing to wrap our heads around.

What we're good at is optimism. I write from California, the traditional American capital of "relentless optimism,"² as the writer Richard Rodriguez put it. Here in California, Hollywood still counts on the happy ending as an American standard. But it goes beyond my home state. American folk wisdom is all about optimism. We say that "the early bird gets the worm," that anyone can succeed given the right opportunity, that "the sun'll come out tomorrow," that there are no limits to what we can accomplish with American ingenuity, that "we have nothing to fear but fear itself." But let's face it, sometimes optimism comes down to wishful thinking.

But *hope*—hope is something quite different. It has more substance than optimism. As one of the three traditional theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—hope is said to be one of the things that lasts. It persists in a world sometimes compromised by shadows and illusions. It doesn't depend on the rosiness of today or tomorrow.

To the theologian Karl Rahner, hope was a grace-empowered "human hospitality for the divine guest," a divinely enabled receptiveness to God.³ Practically I think of hope as that deep sense, whose source we rarely understand or identify, that new things are always possible. It's to say, even in the middle of tragedy or struggle, this is not the end of the story. Hope is a deeply rooted openness to God's ability to act and change things. The temptation of course is to take out the crystal ball and say which things God will change and where and when. But that turns hope into a guarantee. We effectively pose our plans and desires as God's plan—that kingdom of harmony and justice that Jesus promised.

¹ Address delivered at "Liberating the Laity: Pursuing Vatican II Symposium," Seattle University, February 3, 2005.

² Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation: Conversations with My Mexican Father* (New York: Viking, 1992), xvii.

³ Michael A. Scanlon OSA, "Hope," *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot Lane (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 493.

SIGNS OF HOPE

It seems to me then that *looking for hope* for the future of the Church in our own age is about looking for the *signs* of hope, glimpses of God at work now, sightings of the transformations in progress. That gives us the grounding to trust in the future but without illusions, and the deeper sense of strength to act in partnership with God to make good things happen in this world and in the church.

To make this concrete, I want to focus on a few *unlikely* signs of hope that I see in the Church at this time of transition and division. These signs may not seem like good news, but bear with me; I believe they point to transformations going on in our society and in our Church. I wonder if they might speak of the pregnant probability of the new, the strands or traces of the Holy Spirit doing something different and weighted with possibility. In particular, I want to focus on two clusters of unlikely signs: those around young adults in the Church today and those around our greater awareness of culture and cultural diversity today.

DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS

Working with young adults—and I mean by the term Catholics 18-40, by some estimates 40 percent of the Church in the U.S.⁴—and advocating for them within the Church was my work for several years, and while I would in no sense consider myself an expert, I want to share a few insights that I don't believe are the stereotypical observations, but that surprised me and confused me, yet ultimately gave me hope.

It's hard to generalize about a group that large, but I do believe that for the most part, young adults in the U.S. today have different **expectations** about the Church and its place in their lives. The Catholic culture that many of you grew up with did not play a significant part in their lives. Church is simply one piece among many pieces of their lives, one part among many to their identities. Statistics back up my observation.⁵ For these young people, when the Church teaches, even if they are churchgoing folk, the Church is one voice among others in a competitive marketplace of ideas. At the same time, this does not mean they are giving up their Catholic identity.⁶

⁴ Michelle Miller and Brett Hoover, "Beyond Safe Space: Evangelizing Young Adults," *Ministry through the Lens of Evangelization* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2004), 91.

⁵ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, "Young Adult Catholics," *Special Reports* (Fall 2002): 4.

⁶ Cf. John Fulton, et al., *Young Catholics at the New Millennium: The Religion and Morality of Young Adults in Western Countries* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), 68, 110-111; Dean R. Hoge, William D. Dinges, Mary Johnson, Juan L. Gonzalez, Jr., *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 44-45.

This apparent disparity gives birth to odd signs of hope. Because their relationship with the Church is one of many relationships in their lives and identities, young people don't seem to feel *personally* betrayed or disillusioned when scandal threatens or when leadership fails. As one campus minister told me in the midst of the sex abuse scandal, "Young people think, 'Well, of course, the Church is messed up when it comes to sex. Everyone knows that.'"

Going along with that is research and expert experience suggesting that young adults today are less suspicious of religion than generations immediately before them (this despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that they are strikingly less *educated* in religion than these previous generations). There is an opportunity here for Church leadership, though we can only expect to be taken seriously if we learn to be persuasive rather than demanding, and to speak in a language intelligible to young people not immersed in Catholic culture. Otherwise, the leadership simply won't be heard among all the competing voices in a "culture of endless options."⁷

NEO-ORTHODOXY MOVEMENT

I want to say a few words about what I call the neo-orthodoxy movement, the recent trends among some younger Catholics to identify themselves with movements toward greater doctrinal purity in the Catholic Church. Sometimes they are official members of organizations like Opus Dei or Regnum Christi (the lay associates of the Legionaries of Christ), but more often they associate with the movement through conservative colleges like the Franciscan University at Steubenville or Ave Maria University or simply had a mentor priest or were part of a devotional group that socialized them in a more conservative brand of Catholicism. I know many older "Vatican II Catholics" are concerned about this movement, but I do not believe the neo-orthodox movement is a reason to despair or even a sign of anti-Vatican II retrenchment that is going to overtake us.

For one thing, despite some people's inflated statements, there is no evidence that the movement is more than a strong and vocal minority of Catholic young adults; it is not growing exponentially.⁸ In fact, in the United States and the United Kingdom, some research even suggests that younger core Catholics tend to be on the moderate to progressive side.⁹ Nevertheless, this neo-orthodox movement is robust and important, and it has a disproportionate influence on young adult leaders, potential religious vocations, and Church leadership. When I spoke with a group of U.S. bishops in November 2002, a few of them clearly felt this movement was *the* solution to the gap between young adults and the Church.

⁷ See Hoge, et al., *Young Adult Catholics*. They refer to the "culture of choice."

⁸ See James D. Davidson, "Are Young Catholics Increasingly Orthodox?" *The Tidings* (February 7, 2003); accessed online, <http://www.The-Tidings.com>.

⁹ Fulton, et al., *Young Catholics at the New Millennium*, 163.

Theologian Paul Lakeland, in his book on postmodernity, writes about how this type of movement, disturbed by the fragmentation of life today, looks back nostalgically to an earlier (and somewhat imagined) time when tradition was more uncritically honored and identity more certain.¹⁰ But far from being throwbacks to an earlier era, these young folks approve of technology, are into pop culture, and appreciate the greater opportunities people have today. However much they may resist women's ordination or the so-called "contraceptive mentality," they are not against women's voices being influential in the halls of power. In other words, they are a hybrid of the values and culture of today and what they perceive to have come before.

What the young people in this movement *are* looking for is a solid sense of Catholic identity and security in a confusing, changing world. Many have had their time living the high life. Now they have had a conversion experience and are looking to be serious about faith. Mary Anne Reese also made an important distinction in *America* a couple of years ago when she noted that often we are talking here about two different groups of young people: some who focus their search for identity on Catholic devotions and ritual—everything from visiting pilgrimage sites to Our Lady of Guadalupe to eucharistic adoration—while others are focused on doctrinal purity as *the* solution to most contemporary social and Church problems.¹¹ Many of those focused on devotion have little interest in the doctrinal issues.

So what might these signs be telling us? For one thing, that the desire for Catholic identity as an anchor in a fragmented world is alive. People believe that we have something to offer. And even if it starts in a rigid place, who knows where it will end up over time? The word on the street is that time and experience in pastoral settings are challenging the doctrinal rigidity of some of the younger neo-orthodox priests.

Some worry that the neo-orthodox are rigidly uncritical in their obedience to Church authority and undercut the gains of a more accountable Church. Yet Peter Steinfels noted in *A People Adrift* how the sex scandal revealed that conservatives could be as critical of Church authority as liberals.¹² I would suggest that the neo-orthodox are not really recommending blind obedience; they just want the bishops to take their point of view. Who doesn't?

¹⁰ Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 11.

¹¹ Mary Anne Reese, "Refracting the Light: The Broad Spectrum of Young Adult Catholics," *America* 189 (September 22, 2003).

¹² Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 66.

SECOND AREA: CULTURE TODAY

The second general area that I want to put forward as an arena for unlikely signs of hope is that of culture.

We live in a schizophrenic country today: one that wants to celebrate its current multicultural makeup and yet that historically has vigorously defended the dominance of its Anglo-American tradition. Many of us who are white may be blissfully unaware of the tension between these two outlooks, but it is always apparent to immigrants and people of color. An odd result of this state of affairs is that sometimes those of us who are white get the funny idea that culture is something only other people have, people more "ethnic" than us. They have real customs and traditions. We eat Wonder Bread.

The good news is that more and more of us from various backgrounds in the Church in the U.S. are becoming culturally awake and aware, understanding that *our* way of seeing the world is not the only one. We begin to note that people from different cultural backgrounds often see some of the most basic things in life in different ways—time, community, leadership, gender relations, work, power, humor, spirituality.

Why would that be a sign of hope? Mostly in the way such an awareness humbles us. It shakes that sense that my one way of doing things, or my group's way of doing things, is the *only* way.

CULTURAL ORIENTATION: GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF THINGS

One of the specific indications that culture is indeed becoming better understood in the Catholic Church in the United States is the proliferation of cultural and language-orientation programs for ministry. You see them advertised in almost every Catholic publication these days; most of them are oriented to the explosion of our Latino population, as well it should be. Business is booming. Some time in the early 21st century, it is all but demographically certain that Hispanics will form a majority of American Catholics.

A handful of cultural orientation programs now also exist for the many foreign-born priests, religious sisters, and lay pastoral workers arriving to work in this country. These programs help them understand what it means to live and work in the culture of the United States, and how working with a Filipino American or Mexican American community might actually be quite different from working with such a community back home.

One of the consequences of these programs of cultural orientation on both sides, at least when they are working well, is that people discover that what they often saw before as "problems with *those* people," or unreasonableness, or doctrinal errors, or maybe that they just didn't understand at

all, could be better understood under the rubric of cultural differences. Directness in speech doesn't have to be thought of as just being rude. Family loyalty need not be dismissed as clannishness.

Of course, even as we begin to recognize patterns, people don't fit into little cultural boxes. Nevertheless, this kind of cultural discussion, more than just a superficial kind of multiculturalism where we celebrate fiestas and admire people's clothing, could and I hope *will* become more a part of regular Church parlance.

FIGURING OUT THE VATICAN

At this time of great transition in the papacy, I want to talk a moment about the Vatican. Like any group of people, the people who live and work at the Vatican have a culture.

Through a bizarre set of circumstances, friends and I got a private tour of the Vatican grounds several years ago. Out of the dusty, chaotic streets of Rome, we entered into a perfectly swept, manicured, whitewashed refuge with almost no people around. Everyone we talked to was perfectly gracious.

You get the picture. This is a perfectly functioning internal bureaucracy. Even the Romans go to the Vatican to mail their letters as it's a considerable improvement over Italian mail. I'm certain the inhabitants of the Vatican honestly scratch their heads as to why the rest of the world doesn't function as well. If only everyone else would follow their directions and maxims, the world would progress smoothly in moral and religious efficiency, and evolve into a kind of technocratic kingdom of God. Unfortunately, the rest of the human race can't seem to get it together like that.

I am caricaturing, but it's to make a point. The Church leaders who work at the Vatican are not deadset against us. They just think differently. Hopefully a greater awareness of culture prepares us to deal with these substantial gaps in understanding. This is true on their side as well. My hope is that the more the Vatican recognizes the legitimacy of cultural distinctions the world over, the less the local will be seen as "dangerous" and the less a campaign of centralization seen as necessary.

CONCLUSION: THEOLOGY OF THE BOSS

If in fact there is hope in these unlikely signs of young adults' experience and that of culture, the obvious next question, especially for us living in the almost inevitably pragmatic culture of the U.S., is: So what do we *do*? For a tentative answer, I refer to a great Catholic theologian—Bruce Springsteen.

In 2002, Springsteen released "The Rising" in the aftermath of 9/11; many cultural critics saw it as his artistic answer, a cry of hope in a difficult time.

The final song of "The Rising" is called, "City of Ruins," and it explicitly relates hope to action. The singer asks that perennial question of hard times, "Tell me how do I begin again." The song is actually not about the "ruins" of the World Trade Center or the Pentagon but about Springsteen's neglected and blighted hometown of Asbury Park, NJ—a sad but ordinary tale. And his answer to the question of hope and action is quite ordinary as well and very Catholic. "Tell me how do I begin again." In the midst of prayers for strength and love, a chorus of voices replies, "With these hands."

Our baptism as Christians and Catholics makes us both a royal priesthood and sacrament of God's salvation in the world. Every action of the Spirit in our world calls for our cooperation. We might summarize it by saying that signs of hope are not so much for our applause but for our coordinated action. With these hands.

Sadie Rodriguez-Hawkins

Response to Rev. Brett C. Hoover CSP

UNLIKELY SIGNS OF HOPE

Brett presented two "unlikely signs of hope," which indicate that great transformations are afoot or point to great transformations in church and society: Young adults and the Church (Catholics between ages of 18-40) and the consequences of greater awareness of culture and cultural diversity.

I understand why Brett entitled them "unlikely signs of hope."¹ Times have changed; the answers of the past are no longer effective today. Our future hope lies in the young adults and in our increased awareness of culture and cultural diversity.

We have become a nation of greatly polarized people. We are polarized by issues of age, color, creed, economics, politics, and myriad other concerns. We are polarized by debates between clergy and laity, by the enmity between pro-lifer or pro-choice advocates, and most recently in the disparity of our election results at both national and state levels.

We need to look for signs of hope, unlikely or not.

¹ Response delivered at "Liberating the Laity: Pursuing Vatican II Symposium," Seattle University, February 3, 2005.