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Thomas P. Rausch

Loyola Marymount University, trausch@lmu.edu

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Another Generation Gap

Some younger theologians seem uncomfortable. BY THOMAS P. RAUSCH

ARE THE CONCERNS of Catholic theologians changing? It seems so. The concerns of younger Catholics in the academy today are different, perhaps considerably different, from those of my own generation of theologians.

First of all, some younger theologians seem uncomfortable with the enormous polarization in the church today, and with the anger that so often seems to accompany it. Also evident are the “new apologists,” a group of conservative Catholics—Karl Keating, Peter Kreeft, Thomas Howard, Scott Hahn, Patrick Madrid and Mark Shea, to name some of the most prominent—who are enormously popular with many more conservative Catholics.

I’ve been critical of the way the new apologists do theology and their sense of what Catholicism needs today, and I remain so. For example, Robert Sungenis’s Catholic Apologetics International Web site (www.catholicintl.com) takes Pope John Paul II to task for his meeting at Assisi on Jan. 24, 2002, at which representatives of the world religions prayed for peace alongside one another. To Sungenis, this suggested that God accepts the worship of “pagans” and hears their prayers.

But at the same time, I have come to be more sympathetic to some of the new apologists’ concerns. There is no question that they are addressing some real needs for a considerable number of contemporary Catholics, for example evangelization and religious illiteracy. I too have become increasingly interested in evangelization, partly as a result of my involvement over the last 15 years with Evangelical Protestants and partly because I have long had a sense that Catholics are not very evangelical as a church—in spite of the great efforts of Pope John Paul II since the beginning of his pontificate to call the church to a greater sense of its evangelical mission. And after almost 30 years of teaching in a Catholic university, I have become increasingly concerned about the enormous religious and theological illiteracy of so many young Catholics today, something many of us experience even in our own families.

Victor Klimoski, in an article in *Seminary Journal*, noted that the backgrounds of seminarians today are different

from those of their teachers. More and more, he observed, they lack grounding in the Catholic tradition, and their demand for “what the church teaches” may reflect a quest for stability rather than intellectual shallowness. Similarly, Robert T. Schreiter, C.Pp.S., has noted that for many of today’s candidates for religious life, “all that they have experienced religiously and in other dimensions of their lives has been discontinuity and fragmentation.” Their “conservatism” may actually represent a search for coherence and community.

Sister Katarina Schuth, O.S.F., has made some similar observations. She notes that those preparing for ministry in seminaries and theologates, including lay students, come from increasingly different ethnic backgrounds, are older and are less versed in Catholicism. Most came of age after the Second Vatican Council and have no memory of the church before



1970. Many "are relatively uninformed about Church teachings...lack a vocabulary to help them form a Catholic identity and interpret their Catholic experiences."

What this suggests to me is that for many preparing for ministry today, the defining religious experiences of their lives have been different from those of my generation. Those of us who were born before 1950 came of age in a closed and rigid Catholicism; Vatican II offered a liberating vision of a more open church, able to explore new issues. But this present generation has known only the diversity and confusion of the postconciliar church. Many of them had been away from the church. Their defining experience has been of coming to faith at some point in their adult lives. Thus they tend to be more evangelical than an earlier generation, and they want to know what it means to be Catholic. They are less interested in exploring new questions when they know so many who have no faith at all. The reconstructionist, liberal agenda of their teachers is not their primary concern.

Nor do I find this syndrome confined to those preparing for official ministry; there are a considerable number of young people who have come late to faith from a secular culture. Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J., in *Clashing Symbols* (1998), speaks of "a whole new generation of baptized

young adults whose formative experiences with religion or church are so thin as to be almost non-existent." These young people are enthusiastic about their discovery or rediscovery of the church. But without a strong background in the faith, they find little to tell them who they are as Catholics or what is unique about their community in the contemporary Catholic Church, which too often seems more concerned with church reform and with showing how similar Catholics are to other Christians. They are often drawn to more conservative expressions of Catholicism, to the new apologists and other representatives of the Catholic right, with their promise of a clear identity and simple answers to complex problems.

So there is a gap in experience between Catholics of my generation and those who have come on the scene several decades later. That gap leads to some very real differences in attitude. Here are a couple of examples. One comes from a two-part story in *The National Catholic Reporter* (2/18/00) about two religious women, one in her 50's, the other in her 30's.

The older woman, a professor of New Testament at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, observed that many sisters in her age group seem entrenched in "patterns



of life that are based not on the embrace of the future but on the rejection of the past.”

The younger woman, a doctoral student in biblical studies at the University of Chicago, told how an older sister in her community replied, “You’re not honoring my anger,” when she was asked why some of the older sisters were estranged from the church and sometimes chose not to attend Mass at the local parish. “When we respond that we like our parish,” the younger sister commented, “we are often left to feel somehow less a feminist.”

Another example comes from an N.C.R. interview (2/1/02) with Frederick Bauerschmidt, who became a Catholic at age 20 and now, in his early 40’s, is a faculty

member at Loyola College, Baltimore, Md. Bauerschmidt says that theology today is highly fragmented, “with Catholics who think that liberation theology in its myriad forms (Mestizo, Asian, African, feminist, womanist and so on) is still the way forward.” He finds himself in sympathy with younger theologians who are interested in what might broadly be called *ressourcement*, particularly one expression known as “radical orthodoxy,” which seeks to engage post-modern, post-Nietzschean thought. But he also recognizes that for some in the *ressourcement* revival, there is a tendency to see any criticism of the church as disloyalty, or to be dismissive of the theology of liberation. He hopes that ultimately a consistently and constructively critical theological voice will emerge.

Taking the concerns of this younger generation into account, what should be the task of theology today? I would suggest three priorities: evangelization, a renewed sense of Catholic identity and a more inclusive, collegial exercise of authority.

Evangelization

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II has placed evangelization at the center of the contemporary Catholic Church’s understanding of itself and its mission. Without neglecting social justice, the evangelization of culture and interreligious dialogue, he has repeatedly called the church to a “new evangelization,” reaching out to those who no longer practice their faith. In *Ecclesia in America*, an apostolic letter delivered in the course of a pastoral visit to Mexico in 1999, he returned to his theme of evangelization as a “fresh encounter with Jesus Christ” (No. 7). This must always be at the center of the church’s evangelical efforts.

But in spite of an extraordinary missionary past, today’s Catholic Church is not very evangelical. Its mission is not primarily to make other Christians Catholics, as more conservative Catholics often suggest. Nor can it be reduced to the ecclesial reform and the transformation of the world so dear to more progressive Catholics. As Laura Anzilotti, a graduate student at Loyola Marymount, has noted, one rarely finds articles on evangelization in more liberal Catholic magazines like *America* and *Commonweal*.

“In my work, we’re always asking, ‘What is the heart of the matter for this patient?’”



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Joanne Callahan
Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies '87

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