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## **“Personal, Relational, and Extraordinary”: Learning from the Spiritual Language of Gen Z**

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“Personal, Relational, and Extraordinary”:  
Learning from the Spiritual Language of Gen Z

by

Gabrielle Poma

A Pastoral Synthesis Project presented to the

Faculty of the Department of  
Theological Studies  
Loyola Marymount University

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## Abstract

This paper explores the crucial role of language in understanding the spiritual lives of young people today, commonly known as “Gen Z.”

Though significant disaffiliation rates among young people often cause alarm within faith communities, this paper argues that listening carefully to the language of young people provides a more nuanced, in-depth picture that statistics on religious affiliation do not capture, which is critical in developing effective pastoral care for young adults.

This paper opens with a sociocultural approach to Gen Z, drawing upon generational analysis and sociological data to demonstrate how different types of research yield varied results in their findings on young people’s spiritual lives. The exploration section is followed by a Christian perspective on finding faith in unexpected voices through exegesis of Matthew 15:21-28. This portion of the paper argues that, when we encounter people whose worldview differs from our own, language is integral to challenging and transforming our viewpoint. As a response to this matter of taking young people’s spiritual language seriously, the final part of this paper proposes a listening session for teens and their families in the context of a high school Confirmation program.

Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to emphasize the rich interior lives that are already active in young people, even if on paper they may describe themselves as unaffiliated, and that the best way to become part of those ongoing spiritual journeys is through a pastoral ministry that is grounded in accompaniment and listening.

## **Introduction: The Issue with Labels and the Importance of Language**

In my first year of graduate school, I quickly found that the faith lives of young people, or lack thereof, was *the* concern among my peers. Whether the course was on the New Testament or systematic theology, whether my classmates were parents with teenagers or high school religion teachers, the conversation always seemed to circle back to variations of the same questions: “How do we make this relevant to young people?” “Will young people ‘buy in’ to this?” Adding on to this dismal picture is the barrage of statistics informing us that young adults are no longer attending church and pews are emptier than ever. These numbers are at our fingertips, feeding our perception of a barren spiritual landscape.

I sought to reassure my classmates that simply by providing an open door and a listening ear to the young people in their lives, they were sowing the seeds of a spiritually engaged life. I shared anecdotes of long conversations with atheist friends seeking *something*, though they were not sure what, and cradle Catholic friends who had drifted from their families’ conservative parishes in high school, then returned in college when they saw models of a more inclusive faith. In my second semester of the program, I presented on unaffiliated and disaffiliated young people—also called the “Nones,” referring to those who select “no religion” on surveys. I asked two friends to speak to the class about their unique experiences as agnostic young men who are actively involved in the Catholic Church, one as a music minister and the other as a minister of hospitality. As I pulled up my presentation slides, the title caught their eye...and they quickly became indignant! “‘Nones’? I’ve never heard of that before. Hold on. Is that us? Is that what you call us? That’s a little mean. It’s not like I believe in nothing!” More recently, I told my dad that I do not tend to agree with a certain internet personality bishop and his outlook on young people. My dad responded, “What, the Nones? But it’s true, they are.”

It was at this moment that a realization began to dawn on me: there is a divide between how religious institutions and faith congregations perceive young people and their faith lives compared to how young people perceive themselves. These separate conversations, one with individuals in Gen Z (those born roughly between the mid-1990s and early 2010s) and one with a person outside of it, illustrate this disconnect, with language playing a key role in that misunderstanding. The language that “we” (communities of faith) apply to “them” (unaffiliated young people) is likely not language that young people would choose for themselves. Every generation has its own defining characteristics, its own way of speaking and moving in the world; Gen Zers are often also called digital natives—that is, they grew up with the Internet and are savvy with modern technology—and are characterized by their ubiquitous social media usage. If generational differences are a tale as old as time, and Gen Z has the added facet of inhabiting a totally different way of life in terms of tools and resources available to them, it would follow, then, that the language used by young people today for many aspects of their life, faith and spirituality included, may be esoteric to the older generations in their lives.

If Gen Z’s disengagement from the Church is one of the major concerns among contemporary Catholics, it only makes sense to begin by asking how young people refer to the things they consider sacred and spiritual. Without developing a robust understanding of how today’s young people describe their brushes with the transcendent and divine, we talk *about* this group rather than *with* them, and our pastoral care and outreach are rendered ineffective. This requires a posture of humility, recognizing that because Gen Z is largely unchurched, their language may very well fall outside the bounds of, or even synthesize, the language prescribed by various faith traditions. Digging into the language of young people also compels us to openness, realizing that Gen Z is finding “church,” whether that be community or transcendent

experiences, outside of the Church itself. But this can be cause for hope rather than frustration. If parents and grandparents, teachers and ministers, are more attuned to the language that Gen Z uses to describe transcendent experiences, they may find that the young people in their lives are more open to the sacred than they would have expected.

The goal of this paper is to serve as a sort of “translator” for Gen Z, presenting some current scholarly data on the faith lives of young adults as they describe it. Following this explanatory portion is a theological claim that offers a Christian perspective of this challenge, exegeting Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 to shed light on the vital role of dialogue between individuals from different backgrounds. This paper will close with a project proposal that addresses this challenge, grounding itself in the voices of young people and providing the adults in their lives with an opportunity to take their words to heart. By better understanding the language of Gen Z, it is my hope that this paper will provide a more optimistic view of the aforementioned spiritual landscape, while recommending an accompaniment of young people that begins first and foremost with hearing them.

### **A Sociocultural Explanation: iGen, the Solidarity Generation, and the Sacred**

The pastoral concern before us is cultivating a more nuanced understanding of Gen Z’s spiritual language in order to better accompany them. To that end, a sociocultural approach provides a definition of today’s young adults, including some of this generation’s distinctive characteristics. This will include statistics on Gen Z’s religious affiliation, which often drive our understanding of this young generation, but the bulk of this section will focus on qualitative research in which young people described their spiritual experiences firsthand.

First, a word about generational research. “Generation” refers to an age cohort spanning roughly fifteen to twenty years, and generational analysis is useful in understanding how a

“range of factors including demographics, attitudes, historical events...and popular culture” shape general behaviors and attitudes towards various issues.<sup>1</sup> As noted above, Generation Z refers to those young adults born in the mid-1990s to the early 2010s. The nickname “Gen Z” follows the pattern of the previous two generations: Generation X, born in 1965 to 1980, and Generation Y (more commonly referred to as “Millennials,” that is, coming of age in the new millennium), born in 1980 to 1995.<sup>2</sup> As we delve into the landscape of Gen Z, it is worth a disclaimer: generational analysis helps provide a broad understanding of a given age group but should not be used as a strict standard against which individual persons are measured.<sup>3</sup>

Who is Gen Z then? What is important to know about them that might shed light on their interior lives? Young adults today are “more racially and ethnically diverse than previous generations,” with only 52 percent identifying as non-Hispanic white.<sup>4</sup> They are also on a trajectory to be the most well-educated generation so far: “Among 18- to 21-year-olds no longer

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1. Pew Research Center, “The Whys and Hows of Generation Research,” September 3, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/09/03/the-whys-and-hows-of-generations-research/>.

2. “The Whys and Hows.”

3. There has been some critique of Pew’s generational labeling and demographic reports, including an open letter written by sociologist Philip N. Cohen at the University of Maryland, which has over 300 signatories. Concerns include the arbitrary assigning and division of generations, the stereotyping of otherwise diverse groups, and the promotion of generational analysis as a pseudoscience when it is not firmly grounded in empirical research. See: Rebecca Elliott, “Generationalism: Understanding the difference between what generations are and what generations do,” *The Sociological Review Magazine*, October 5, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.51428/tsr.fmel4859>.

4. Pew Research Center, “On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far,” May 14, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>.

in high school in 2018, 57% were enrolled in a two-year or four-year college,” up five percent from Millennials in 2003 and fourteen percent from Gen Xers in 1987.<sup>5</sup>

As “digital natives,” who grew up with the internet and therefore technological savvy, Gen Z can also be understood in terms of time spent online. A 2022 report by Pew Research Center found that 95 percent of teens ages 13 to 17 have access to a smartphone, compared to 73 percent in 2015.<sup>6</sup> 97 percent of teens report daily internet usage, and 46 percent specify being on the internet constantly.<sup>7</sup> For generational and social psychologist Dr. Jean Twenge, the internet is the hallmark of today’s young adults, for whom she coined the term “iGen.”<sup>8</sup> Using 1995 as the beginning of iGen, Twenge notes that this is the same year the internet was born. Additionally, “In 2006, Facebook opened up to anyone over the age of 13—so those born since 1993 have been able to live their entire adolescence on social networking sites.”<sup>9</sup> In addition to “Internet,” Twenge also says iGen stands for both “individualism” and “income inequality.” Twenge states that young people take individualism “for granted, a broad trend that grounds their bedrock sense of equality as well as their rejection of traditional social rules.”<sup>10</sup>

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5. “On the Cusp.”

6. Pew Research Center, “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022,” August 10, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>.

7. “Teens, Social Media.”

8. Jean Twenge, *iGen* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 7.

9. Twenge, 5.

10. Twenge, 2-3.



By now, a few different themes have arisen pertaining to Gen Z: diversity, education, equality, individuality. These are some of the concepts that lead Loyola Marymount University (LMU) President Dr. Timothy Law Snyder to dub Gen Z “The Solidarity Generation”:

The rising generation’s diversity expands beyond ethnic identity; it includes and embraces sexual and gender identity and diversity, anti-xenophobia, and matters that span socioeconomic strata. They are concerned with the self, but not the “I-self”; rather, they are about *all* selves. Part of standing for a given self is that each self should have a right to...carve a healthy, supported life and lifestyle based on who they are, their personal *identity*.<sup>11</sup>

Where Twenge says “individualism,” Snyder opts for “identity.” For Snyder, Gen Z is marked by a radical inclusivity that is grounded in an acceptance of identity. This conviction in self-determination leads Gen Z, broadly speaking, to call out systemic injustice and advocate for equity. Indeed, “when it comes to race relations...roughly two-thirds of Gen Zers and Millennials say [that blacks are treated less fairly than whites in this country], compared with about half of Gen Xers and Boomers and smaller shares among the Silent Generation.”<sup>12</sup> Turning to views on family, 48 percent of Gen Zers and 47 percent of Millennials see gay and lesbian marriage as a societal good, compared to “only one-third of Gen Xers and about one-quarter of Boomers (27%),” with an analogous trend arising when asked about interracial marriage.<sup>13</sup> Looking at Gen Z’s attitudes toward individual identities, 50 percent “think that society is not accepting enough” of individuals who identify as non-binary (neither man nor woman), similarly

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11. Timothy Law Snyder, “In Students We Trust: The Solidarity Generation,” *Jesuit Higher Education* 10, no. 2 (2021): 1, <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol10/iss2/3>.

12. “On the Cusp.”

13. “On the Cusp.”

to 47 percent of Millennials and larger than 39 percent of Gen Xers and 36 percent of Baby Boomers.<sup>14</sup>

Returning to our original concern of religious affiliation, The Public Religion Research Institute’s (PRRI) landmark 2020 Census of American Religion and its annual updates shed light on the current landscape. The census comprises responses from 40,000 adults, ages 18 and older and from all 50 states, and the 2022 Census focuses primarily on shifting trends in religious affiliation. The 2022 Census reports, “young Americans ages 18-29 have dominated the growth in the religiously unaffiliated category over the past four decades, but the percentage of those in this age group who are unaffiliated has remained stable around 34-38% since 2016.”<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, religious diversity is a hallmark of the 18-29 age group: “Christians constitute a bare majority at 54 percent, 36 percent are religiously unaffiliated, “and the remainder are Jewish (2%), Muslim (2%), Buddhist (1%), Hindu (1%), or another religion (1%).”<sup>16</sup>

For the parent or minister, these numbers may be dissatisfactory. In the eyes of a parish, does it matter that the majority of young adults are Christian, when even fewer are Catholic and the pews remain stubbornly empty? For families in which the age of 18 signals adulthood and autonomy, the statistic of nearly one in four unaffiliated young adults can be highly disheartening for concerned parents. It may signal a ticking clock or a white flag of defeat—capture your child’s spiritual curiosity before they leave the nest or bust! These numbers, though

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14. “On the Cusp.”

15. PRRI, “PRRI 2022 Census of American Religion: Religious Affiliation Updates and Trends,” February 4, 2023, <https://www.ppri.org/spotlight/ppri-2022-american-values-atlas-religious-affiliation-updates-and-trends/>.

16. PRRI, “The 2020 PRRI Census of American Religion,” July 8, 2021, <https://www.ppri.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/>.

valuable, paint with broad strokes by necessity and do not tell a complete story. They tell us little, if anything, about what young people actually believe in or what fulfills them, because the singular label of religious affiliation simply cannot accomplish this. What is more, the voices of younger members of Generation Z, those who are still teenagers, are not represented in these numbers. Asking different questions, of different people, is the task of language.

Each year, Springtide Research Institute releases *The State of Religion & Young People*, a report that focuses on different facets of Gen Z’s spiritual lives. 2023’s report draws upon surveys of over 4,500 young people ages 13 to 25 and 35 60-minute interviews. Its theme is *Exploring the Sacred*, which Springtide defines as “those things, places, or moments that feel special and set apart from others—experiences that evoke a sense of wonder, awe, gratitude, deep truth, and/or interconnectedness.”<sup>17</sup> Nineteen percent of respondents each identify as Protestant or “Just Christian,” while 16 percent identify as Roman Catholic, which, interestingly, results in the same bare majority as the PRRI census of 54 percent. Other represented faith traditions include Mormon/Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saint (LDS) [5 percent], Jewish (2 percent), and Muslim (2 percent). 15 percent identify as “Nothing in Particular,” and 6 percent each identify as atheist and agnostic.<sup>18</sup> Adding together these last three groups, Springtide’s 27 percent is smaller than the counterpart “Unaffiliated” group in PRRI’s 2020 census at 36 percent.<sup>19</sup> This may be attributed partly to the difference in age groups surveyed, 13 to 25 and 18

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17. Springtide Research Institute, *The State of Religion and Young People 2023: Exploring the Sacred* (Bloomington, MN: Springtide Research Institute, 2023), 6.

18. *Exploring the Sacred*, 12.

19. The 2020 PRRI Census does not include “Atheist” as a designated group.

to 29 respectively, and the likelihood that younger Gen Zers still adopt the religious affiliation of their family of origin.

When asked if they had ever experienced a sacred moment, 55 percent of Springtide's respondents said yes, with another 16 percent answering maybe.<sup>20</sup> Broken down by affiliation, at least half of young people who identified with each faith tradition answered in the affirmative, i.e. 67 percent of Mormon/LDS respondents, 64 percent of Muslim respondents, and 58 percent of Roman Catholic respondents. Even at least a quarter of those who identified as "nothing in particular," "agnostic," or "atheist" also reported having had a sacred experience (40 percent, 39 percent, and 29 percent, respectively).<sup>21</sup>

The value of Springtide providing a definition of the sacred for respondents cannot be overstated: "wonder, awe, gratitude, deep truth, and/or interconnectedness." These are universal terms that elicit strong emotion and even transformation, without ties to any religious tradition. "Sacred," which may be an otherwise confusing or intimidating term because of its religious connotations, particularly to young people with no particular affiliation, is suddenly made approachable. They are then able to speak freely, without fear of being "wrong," because they are not being measured against the standards of a faith tradition that is not their own. Springtide's definition essentially asks young people to think of when they have been deeply moved, empowering them to claim those experiences as sacred. Put another way, Springtide's definition of the sacred accommodates young people's diverse religious affiliations and varied comfort levels with spiritual language by using broad yet evocative terms that allow respondents to locate their identities within those words and adopt that spiritual language for themselves.

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20. *Exploring the Sacred*, 22.

21. *Exploring the Sacred*, 23.

When asked how they would define the sacred, young people frequently used the following words (in no particular order): “special,” “relationships,” “religion,” “place of worship,” “God,” “personal,” “religion,” “connection,” and “family.”<sup>22</sup> As for the physical location of these sacred experiences, respondents could select more than one option, and the five most common responses were: “in nature” (69 percent), “in the privacy of my home or room” (68 percent), “at a place of worship” (55 percent), “at a religious or spiritual retreat” (49 percent), and “in transit from one place to another” (49 percent).<sup>23</sup>

If Gen Z might also be called “iGen,” it is worth noting that only 36 percent of Springtide’s respondents said they experienced the sacred online, and 26 percent of those individuals said this had happened more than once.<sup>24</sup> In interviews, some credited “live broadcasts of religious services or practices online,” while others reflected on the significance of video calls and social media interactions with friends, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>25</sup> Though the majority of young adults had not experienced such moments online themselves, many interviewees recognized that such moments are possible, even if there are limitations.<sup>26</sup>

For Twenge, iGen is characterized in part by its individualism, which informs young people’s sense of equality and rejection of tradition. In terms of religious sensibilities, the varied lists of sacred places and definitions for the sacred may bring to mind the prolific term “spiritual

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22. *Exploring the Sacred*, 21.

23. *Exploring the Sacred*, 25.

24. *Exploring the Sacred*, 38.

25. *Exploring the Sacred*, 39-40.

26. *Exploring the Sacred*, 40.

but not religious,”<sup>27</sup> which some interpret as a sort of vagueness or indecision that stands in direct contrast with the fundamental truths that faith traditions offer us. For those who adhere to particular faith traditions and its designated rituals and places of worship, it can be tempting to shun that ambiguity. But one may also choose to see these responses as having a posture of prayer. To experience the sacred in nature, in one’s room, or even in transit intrinsically requires a sense of openness, a willingness to be transformed and moved at any given moment and in any space. To define the sacred as “special,” “personal,” or “connection” is to recognize the power of such moments.

In keeping with these definitions, Springtide identified three “dimensions” that permeate young people’s descriptions of sacred experiences: personal, relational, and extraordinary.<sup>28</sup> Below are Springtide’s definitions for each dimension,<sup>29</sup> as well as some of the terms that respondents could choose from to characterize each dimension (the percentages are the total respondents who indicated the statement was “somewhat true” or “very true,” and they could select more than one descriptor):

- “Sacred moments are *personal*, meaning they feel tailor-made for the young person, communicating deep truths that are specific to the person experiencing them.” More than 80 percent of respondents who had experienced a sacred moment identified with the following feelings: “blessed” (83 percent), “intensely curious” (83 percent), “humbled” (85 percent), “deep gratitude” (86 percent), and “a sense of inspiration” (87 percent).<sup>30</sup>

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27. See: Robert P. Jones., Daniel Cox, and Art Raney, “Searching for Spirituality in the U.S.: A New Look at the Spiritual but Not Religious,” PRRI, November 6, 2017. <https://www.prii.org/research/religiosity-and-spirituality-in-america/>.

28. *Exploring the Sacred*, 26.

29. *Exploring the Sacred*, 26.

30. *Exploring the Sacred*, 27.

- “Sacred moments are *relational*, meaning they are marked by profound feelings of interconnectedness.” 72 percent felt that they were “in the presence of a higher power,” while 86 percent “felt intense feelings of loving kindness,” and 87 percent “felt connected to something that was really real.”<sup>31</sup>
- “Sacred moments are *extraordinary*, meaning they are set apart from a young person’s ordinary life in special and meaningful ways.” 86 percent said the experience “felt unlike everyday life in a special way,” as well as “a sense of awe,” and 87 percent “felt a deep sense of peace and serenity.”<sup>32</sup>

It is helpful to recall once again Springtide’s definition for the sacred: “those things, places, or moments that feel special and set apart from others—experiences that evoke a sense of wonder, awe, gratitude, deep truth, and/or interconnectedness.”<sup>33</sup> This definition reflects the latter two dimensions of “relational” and “extraordinary” that young people used to describe their own sacred moments. Notably, the word “personal” does not arise in Springtide’s definition, but it does in young people’s own responses. This is evocative, perhaps, of the individualism discussed earlier. But within this language of feeling inspired, grateful, humbled, curious, and blessed,<sup>34</sup> it is possible to identify other sentiments as well: a desire to be seen, the security that comes with feeling chosen and valued. Springtide’s definition of the sacred also does not include mention of the divine, yet the majority of respondents who reported a sacred moment also indicated having felt connected to a higher power. Put together, these three overlapping dimensions comprise a decision to equate the sacred with the transcendent and to enter that relationship, whatever it means to the young person experiencing it. By peering into and embracing how young people view the moments they consider sacred, we can become privy

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31. *Exploring the Sacred*, 28.

32. *Exploring the Sacred*, 29.

33. *Exploring the Sacred*, 6.

34. *Exploring the Sacred*, 27.

to the deep truth that resides in those experiences, recognizing that truth is not the monopoly of certain lifestyles or faith traditions. Validating those moments is crucial for intergenerational relationships and understanding, as well as the pastoral care of young people.

### **A Theological Perspective: Exegeting Matthew 15:21-28**

At this point, a Christian theological perspective must meet the sociocultural explanation, especially if we are to offer a solution grounded in the Catholic tradition. Another way of understanding Gen Z's spiritual language is the concept that faith can be and is asserted by unexpected voices, and encounter is integral to transforming our perception of these voices. This theme of faith in surprising places has a long history in stories of non-Israelites in the Hebrew Bible and Gentiles in the New Testament. Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman in the Gospel of Matthew (15:21-28), which is widely agreed to draw upon the older version in Mark 7:24-30, but with marked differences,<sup>35</sup> is one such story. By engaging in its exegesis, we will find a Christian perspective on taking earnest displays of faith seriously, however unconventional, and how engaging in dialogue can transform and broaden the ways we view such faith.

A mother, whom Matthew specifies as a Canaanite, approaches Jesus and petitions him to expel the demon that is possessing her daughter. Jesus first chooses to ignore her, while his disciples request that he send her away for pestering them. The first baffling statement comes in 15:24, and it is directed not to the woman, but the disciples: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." The mother continues her pleas, addressing Jesus as Lord, but she is now met with insult: "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs"

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35. Kara J. Lyons-Pardue, "A Syrophenician Becomes a Canaanite: Jesus Exegetes the Canaanite Woman in Matthew," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 13, no. 2 (2019): 235, doi:10.5325/jtheointe.13.2.0235.



(15:26). Quick-witted and unperturbed, the woman responds, ““Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters”” (15:27). This successfully reaches Jesus’ ears; he praises her for her faith and grants her request.

This is an uncomfortable text, to say the least. Jesus is abrasive, perhaps even xenophobic and misogynistic. This is far from the Jesus we have come to expect from the evangelist whose Gospel also contains the Beatitudes, making it all too easy to skip over this passage and turn away from the confusion it causes. But by tackling this discomfort head-on and reading the text against Matthew’s historical context, key themes of exclusion and inclusion, marginalization and privilege, and, of course, transformation and faith emerge. These themes can inform how we choose to encounter unexpected and unconventional displays of faith, particularly as it pertains to young people who are largely unaffiliated yet still spiritually engaged.

It is widely agreed that the Gospel of Matthew was written in the late first century, sometime between 80 and 90 CE. There is evidence in the Gospel that the destruction of the Jewish Temple during the Jewish War (66-70 CE) had already taken place, and Ignatius of Antioch seems to reference Matthew in his *Letter to the Philadelphians*, circa 110 CE. As for the geographical location, Antioch in Syria presents a possibility, in part because “Matthew is the only Gospel to mention awareness of Jesus’ activities in Syria,” in addition to evidence from Acts of the Apostles and Peter’s letters.<sup>36</sup> In terms of prevalent themes, Matthew’s Gospel maintains strong ties to the Hebrew Bible and Judaism overall. The evangelist quotes the Septuagint frequently, along with the phrase “to fulfill what was spoken...by the prophet.”

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36. Aaron M. Gale, “The Gospel According to Matthew, Introduction and Annotations by Aaron M. Gale,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, Second Edition*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 9.

Aaron M. Gale also notes that the Gospel “displays substantial interest in Jewish observance,”<sup>37</sup> with Jesus engaging the Pharisees in debates over such issues as cleanliness, Sabbath laws (12:1-14), and divorce (19:3-6). Matthew addresses Jesus by several titles, including “Son of David” and “king,” in order to depict “Jesus as the fulfillment of Torah and prophets.”<sup>38</sup>

The story of the Canaanite woman must be understood in relation to this strong Jewish identity that permeates the Gospel. Jesus’ response to his disciples in 15:24 echoes an earlier exclusionary statement that favors the Jewish people: “Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them thus, ‘Do not go into pagan territory or enter a Samaritan town. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (10:5-6). However, this statement comes well after Matthew’s extensive genealogy that includes Gentiles, as well as Jesus’ healing of a centurion’s servant (8:5-13). In the midst of all this, Jesus still speaks to the Canaanite woman in harsh terms. Adding to the confusion, several chapters later “in 28:19, the resurrected Jesus extends his mission to ‘all nations’ or ‘all the Gentiles.’”<sup>39</sup> In light of all these “mixed signals,” a question arises: *who can have faith?* This is the question to which we must continuously return as we exegete the story of the Canaanite woman, while also keeping young people at the front of our minds.

This exchange takes place at the margins, figuratively and literally. First and foremost, Jesus’ conversational partner is a woman, and Matthew’s specification of her as Canaanite “would have evoked the rich and complex history between Canaan and Israel to Matthew’s audience. Clearly, this would bring to mind her ‘otherness’ and ‘foreignness.’”<sup>40</sup> Put another way,

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37. Gale, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” 9.

38. Gale, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” 9.

39. Gale, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” 29.

“This story...is especially significant in that it is centered on a *woman* and a *Gentile*, someone doubly marginalized.”<sup>41</sup> Secondly, this exchange takes place in “the region of Tyre and Sidon (15:21), and the evangelist specifies that the Canaanite woman “came and called out,” which “suggests that she is crossing the borderlines to come out and meet Jesus.”<sup>42</sup> Making explicit what Matthew has implicitly suggested, the disciples seemingly do not hesitate in viewing this woman as an outsider and turning away from her (15:23). Unmoved by her requests, they instead ask Jesus to send her away. Okure reflects, “One is inclined to think that the disciples’ plea to Jesus to get rid of the woman...was based on their desire to be saved from the embarrassment of a Gentile woman shouting after them in the street in Gentile territory.”<sup>43</sup> She goes on to refer to the disciples’ spirituality as one of “election and exclusion, a way of relating to God marked by excluding others.”<sup>44</sup> In the first three verses of this passage, both character and setting are introduced as outsiders, and the ground is laid for a story that subverts expectations. This thread

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40. Daniel N. Gullotta, “Among Dogs and Disciples: An Examination of the Story of the Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15:21-28) and the Question of the Gentile Mission within the Matthean Community,” *Neotestamentica* 48, no. 2 (2014): 329, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAn3812741&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

41. Melanie S. Baffes, “Jesus and the Canaanite Woman: A Story of Reversal,” *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 35, no. 2 (2011): 13, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001864306&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

42. Gullotta, “Among Dogs and Disciples,” 330.

43. Teresa Okure, “The Life-Giving Spirituality of the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Matt 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30),” *Grace & Truth* 37, no. 2 (2021): 46, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiGU0220331000949&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

44. Okure, “Life-Giving Spirituality,” 46.

will continue when this “doubly marginalized” individual wins her verbal challenge against Jesus.

Far from contradicting the disciples, Jesus seems to not only agree, but think even worse of this mother than his companions do, using the shocking analogy of dogs at the table. This is reminiscent of Jesus’ words during the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, or throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot, and turn and tear you to pieces” (Mt 7:6). Of this verse, Gullotta notes, “the coupling by Matthew of ‘dogs’ and the most unclean and foul animal throughout the Hebrew Bible, namely pigs, cannot be a mistake.”<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Rowlands draws attention to the Greek translation of these verses, highlighting that different words for “dog” are used in each one. 7:6 utilizes “the regular form *kuōn*...denotes stray, unclean dogs” while in 15:26 “*kunarium* (the diminutive form) carries strong implications of a house dog or lapdog.”<sup>46</sup> Turning to Josephus and his body of work as an approximate contemporary of Matthew, Rowlands offers the following analysis on the more derogatory form, *kuōn*, used in 7:6: “...he uses the word *kuōn* 21 times in total...ten times while describing dogs as scavengers and four times when talking about the insignificance of dogs. More significantly, the remaining seven uses of the word are used to insult someone.”<sup>47</sup> Addressing the two different Greek words used for “dog,” Rowlands attributes this to the household imagery of Jesus’ metaphor: “If Jesus described the woman as a stray, it would make no sense in the context of a house.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, it seems that “dog” is unquestionably an insult, and the two forms of the

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45. Gullotta, “Among Dogs and Disciples,” 334.

46. Jonathan Rowlands, “Difficult texts: ‘A Dog at the Table’ in Matthew 15.21-28,” *Theology* 122, no 4 (2019): 286, doi:10.10.1177/0040571919843749.

47. Rowlands, “Difficult texts,” 286.

word within the Greek translation of Matthew are used for the sake of clarity rather than to soften the insult to the Canaanite woman in chapter 15. It may lack xenophobic or misogynistic connotations, which we might be tempted to apply with a contemporary perspective, but nonetheless it is clear that, at the outset of this exchange, Jesus does not see the woman's needs as a priority, but rather a distraction or waste of his capacities.

Just as shocking as the insult is the fact that, even in her verbal sparring, the woman does not outright disagree with Jesus' characterization.<sup>49</sup> Rather, she takes the analogy in stride and builds upon it, asserting her confidence in Jesus' ability to respond to the needs of her daughter. The Canaanite woman's profession of faith stands out in the middle of a narrative sequence (13:54 to 16:20) that J. Martin C. Scott characterizes by its "growing sense of tension and frustration in Jesus over the inadequate response of those around him."<sup>50</sup> In 13:54-58, Jesus returns to Nazareth and is rebuffed by his own people. In 14:22-33, Peter attempts to meet Jesus on the water and fails. "O you of little faith," Jesus tells him, "Why did you doubt?" In short, "in the midst of much conflict, misunderstanding and rejection... [the Canaanite woman] demonstrates a consistency of faith which not even the disciples, with their acclamation 'Son of God' in the boat or ultimately at Caesarea Philippi, have been able to maintain."<sup>51</sup>

Within this longer narrative structure is an even more striking and immediate sequence of miracles. The feeding of the five thousand precedes this healing (14:13-21), and the feeding of four thousand closely follows (15:32-39). In both miracles, several baskets are left over,

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48. Rowlands, "Difficult texts," 286.

49. Gullotta, "Among Dogs and Disciples," 334.

50. Scott, "Test-Case," 33.

51. Scott, "Test-Case," 41.

foreshadowing then underscoring the woman's point "that even when the 'children' have been fed, there is more than enough left over even in the scraps for the outsiders to be fed."<sup>52</sup> To further underscore the point, there are twelve baskets of extra food remaining in the feeding of the five thousand, reminiscent of the twelve tribes of Israel. Both the literal leftover food and the spiritual nourishment it symbolizes is intended for the Jewish people. In contrast, following Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman, the feeding of the four thousand results in seven baskets, "the perfect number which the reader may hear as echoing all of God's creation, Gentiles included!"<sup>53</sup>

It is understandable if contemporary readers find the conclusion of the Canaanite woman's story unsatisfying and unsettling. Yes, her daughter is healed. Yes, the "dogs" are fed. Yes, she may even be a catalyst in the broadening of Jesus' ministry. But did Jesus have to treat her poorly in the first place? Are we at risk of seeing this woman as narrative fodder rather than a person carrying heavy burdens? Must we be content with the woman's status as afterthought and second-class citizen, as she seems to be? If we are made uncomfortable in the reading of Jesus' words, perhaps it is because privilege is made out to be biblically sanctioned. As Guy Nave puts it, "Privilege associated with Jesus' biological and ethnic identity is on clear display in this passage."<sup>54</sup> In stark contrast, Matthew's identification of the Canaanite woman "not only

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52. J. Martin C. Scott, "Matthew 15:21-28: A Test-Case for Jesus' Manners," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 19, no. 63 (1997): 40, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001016561&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

53. Scott, "Test-Case," 40.

54. Guy Nave, "Challenging Privilege through the Preaching and Teaching of Scripture." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47, no. 3 (2020): 16, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAiE8N200817000385&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

emphasized her ethnic *otherness*, it also challenged the author's audience to reflect on a long history of ethnic hatred."<sup>55</sup> As a Jewish man, as a teacher, and as the one with power to heal, if he so chooses, there is a clear power differential here, and Jesus holds the "upper hand."

Our question of who can have faith is at the core, then, one of privilege. As Catholics, do we privilege a familiar faith that takes place in the pews? Do we view faith as an act that is limited to the baptized? Or do we take the notion of general revelation seriously, not just acknowledging, but reveling in the knowledge that God's presence permeates the world, and that God wishes for Godself to be known? Do we readily believe that "whoever labors to penetrate the secrets of reality with a humble and steady mind, even though he is unaware of the fact, is nevertheless being led by the hand of God, who holds all things in existence, and gives them their identity"?<sup>56</sup> These words from *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, reflects Pope John XXIII's hopes for the Second Vatican Council: that it would open its doors to the contemporary world. *Gaudium et Spes* opens by asserting human dignity, and the inherent rights that accompany it, and goes on to recognize that, though there are tensions, the Church has much to learn from human innovation and progress. Some sixty years later, in a Church that is irrevocably changed by Vatican II, these words remind us that our current reality of disaffiliation and concerns about intergenerational understanding do not happen outside the Church. Rather, they are life-giving opportunities for encounter and transformation, two modes of being in which language plays a vital role.

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55. Nave, "Challenging Privilege," 17.

56. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* accessed November 5, 2023, Vatican.va, 36.

As we seek to understand the inner lives of young people, we would do well to notice the role of language in revealing the Canaanite woman's great faith: "The title [Son of David] still sounds strange in the mouth of a non-Jew. Why would a 'pagan' woman want to hail Jesus with an ascription so thoroughly Jewish in its outlook?"<sup>57</sup> Lee echoes this sentiment, calling it "striking" that "in daring to request healing for her demonized daughter, the woman uses insider language, language found elsewhere in Matthew only on the lips of the people of Israel."<sup>58</sup> This Gentile mother succeeds where Jesus' own followers, his own Jewish people, have failed: she confidently proclaims his identity as Son of David and asserts her faith in his healing power. She sees the bigger picture, recognizing Jesus for who he is and identifying him as such. That is, the "outsider" is not precluded from clearly seeing things as they are and naming them. This is something we must especially keep in mind when young people point out the harm and hypocrisy of the institutional Church.

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is rendered astonishing by its language; not only does the Canaanite woman assert her faith in Jesus, but she challenges him in the process. Baffes calls it a role reversal,<sup>59</sup> while Gene R. Smillie uses fencing imagery to characterize the rapid exchange of words between them: "She tacitly agrees with the conventional nationalistic principles the Jewish Messiah has been articulating...and yet parries with the riposte [in verse 27]."<sup>60</sup> However one might describe it, she demonstrates the faith that is so elusive to the twelve,

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57. Scott, "Test-Case," 36.

58. Dorothy A. Lee, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15.21-28): Narrative, Theology, Ministry." *Journal of Anglican Studies* 13, no. 1 (2015): 15, doi:10.1017/S1740355314000187.

59. Baffes, "Jesus and the Canaanite Woman," 17.



recognizing Jesus as Lord. By necessity, this also means that Jesus takes on the role of adversary. This is typically the function of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the insider who is so preoccupied with how things “should” be that they fail to recognize the great faith shown by others or exhibit it themselves. Exclusion thus becomes their *modus operandum*, which the Canaanite woman identifies and subverts:

She...has seen through the mask of Jewish exclusivism in [Jesus’] conventional speech and knows what he can—and she correctly believes, will—do for her. She has faith that, even acknowledging some kind of Jewish priority in the ordered social system of the people of God, mercy and help are to be hoped for from this Master, not on the basis of her status, but of his.<sup>61</sup>

Encounter in this story thus transforms exclusion into inclusion, for the man who told his followers to go nowhere among the Gentiles (Mt 10:5-6) is the same man who, when faced with the undeniable faith of a Gentile, is compelled to grant her request. Post-Resurrection, Jesus definitively expands his ministry when he instructs his followers to make disciples of *all* nations (Mt 28:19). As a narrative, we can interpret these contradicting verses not as “mixed signals” but as a process of continued transformation and a broadening of Jesus’ own understanding of faith. Even when Jesus makes sweeping statements about the Gentiles, the story of the Canaanite woman points to a different reality, namely the importance of face-to-face dialogue in challenging our notions and shifting our perspectives.

This is the spirit of *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis’ Encyclical on Fraternity and Social Friendship, which was written amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapters 6 and 7, entitled

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60. Smillie, Gene R, ““Even the Dogs’: Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 1 (March 2002): 93, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.electra.lmu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001328342&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

61. Smillie, “Even the Dogs,” 93.

“Dialogue and Friendship in Society” and “Paths of Renewed Encounter,” respectively, especially addresses conversation as a catalyst to transformation. Put plainly, Francis writes, “Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable. This also means finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life. For they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centres of power where weighty decisions are made.”<sup>62</sup>

Pope Francis is speaking, of course, of the poor, marginalized, and suffering, who are close to his heart, including indigenous peoples and those who bear the traumas of such atrocities as the Holocaust and the atomic bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>63</sup> But we must also realize that the peripheries exist in front of us, sometimes of our own doing. A margin is a gap, and to place stringent criteria on faith and spirituality, or to ignore real harm done by the institutional Church, from a colonial history to the abuse crisis, is to create that gap: an “us” and a “them.” Pope Francis reminds us that the beauty and, yes, discomfort, of encounter is that it urges us to acknowledge worldviews other than our own. The unique spiritual lives of disaffiliated or unaffiliated young people exist beyond and outside of the Church, but they need not be on the margins of it. If we choose to remain attentive to young people’s struggles with the institutional Church or the places and experiences that fulfill them spiritually, we can identify with more clarity the ways in which the Church’s structures of power have hurt rather than helped and use that knowledge in our transformation.

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62. Francis, *Fratelli tutti* [Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship], The Holy See, October 3, 2020, sec. 215, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html).

63. See Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, sec. 247-248.

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman affirms language as a catalyst of that transformation. His attitude, regardless of how we may feel about it, takes a marked turn from exclusion to inclusion. This shift takes place only after he fully notices and appreciates her language; he recognizes the truth in her words and praises the faith that they demonstrate. "By positioning Jesus as the learner in this story, the author allows the disciples and the Jewish leaders to learn along with him. At the same time, he allows women, Gentiles, or other marginalized individuals to be empowered and affirmed by identifying with the Canaanite woman."<sup>64</sup> In the same way, the broadening of our interpretation of "faith" is our own choice. This Matthean story demonstrates that when we are tied to preconceived notions of person and place—the spaces someone can enter and what they should be saying to whom—we are distracted from their humanity, from their longings and beliefs.

As we listen to the voices of young people, we must maintain a holistic view of who they are, what they are saying, and what they are seeking to communicate to us. They may not speak the language of liturgy or sacraments, or use devotional language, but they may still use "insider language" as the Canaanite woman does, recognizing clearly where God, or their version of the divine or transcendent, works in the world. As we consider these interconnected elements of person, place, and language, let us turn again to the language of young people. "My Sacred Space: A Visual Gallery," curated by Springtide Research Institute, "features 100 original photos and descriptions submitted by young people ages 13 to 25 depicting the spaces they consider sacred."<sup>65</sup> The appendix highlights some of those photos and words, revealing these young

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64. Baffes, "Jesus and the Canaanite Woman," 19.

65. "My Sacred Space: A Visual Gallery," Springtide Research institute, accessed November 8, 2023, <https://www.springtideresearch.org/my-sacred-space-gallery>. See appendix.

people's interior lives and spiritual truths, inviting us to "encounter" them with an attitude of openness. The spiritual landscape is not as desolate as the statistics on affiliation would have us believe, but we will continue to see it as barren if we expect young people's faith to conform to our own definitions of what faith should be. Rather than wishing our young people would do more or believe differently, our own transformation is made possible when we choose to listen to and engage with the experiences that young people consider sacred and spiritual. *Who can have faith?* Anyone, if we choose to believe so.

### **Pastoral Project Proposal: Listening Sessions and Parent Presentations**

Having utilized both sociocultural and theological approaches to the spiritual language of Gen Z, we return now to the pastoral concerns of intergenerational understanding and accompaniment for young people and a possible plan to address it. Up until this point, I have referred to young people broadly, and Gen Z roughly spans from early teens to late twenties. As with all pastoral ministry, any practical measure must take into account particular contexts, including stage in life and social location. Considering this, my proposed pastoral plan focuses on the particular age group and pastoral context of high schoolers in the process of preparing for Confirmation in a parish. Understanding that Confirmation can be celebrated much earlier depending on the diocese, this project can also be applied in a youth ministry program designed for teens. I have chosen to focus on this age group for a few reasons: teenagers are forming their identity and exploring the limits of their independence, and they are doing so in relation to their family of origin, whom they are still dependent on, even as they are self-differentiating. How many teenagers have we encountered that say, "I'm here because of my parents," when asked why they are present in Confirmation class? Confirmation, at the high school level, can be a "last

ditch effort” for concerned catechists and parents, while it is a last checkbox for reluctant teenagers.

Taking a cue from Pope Francis, who at the beginning of the synodal journey exhorted us “to become a *listening Church*, to break out of our routine and pause from our pastoral concerns in order to stop and listen,”<sup>66</sup> I propose two listening sessions and one parent presentation for high schoolers enrolled in a two-year Confirmation program (as is common practice in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles). The primary goal of this three-part program of a first session, presentation, and second session is to provide youth with a space where their spiritual sensibilities and experiences are met with genuine care and openness by religious educators who can help teens understand these occurrences in the context of sacramental preparation. This is not to say that the catechist is tasked with constraining these experiences strictly within the language of the Catholic tradition, but rather, if a young person attempts to describe a sense or memory that they find is beyond words, the catechist is equipped to supply the language and persons that may resonate with them. The secondary goal of this program is to ground this sacramental preparation in the very lives of those young people who are undertaking it, by giving families and catechists a view into how young people make sense of their spiritual lives.

**Timing of Listening Sessions.** Assuming the program parallels the school year, one listening session would take place at the beginning of the program in the fall, and the second in the spring, close to Confirmation (for second-year students), as something of an icebreaker and reflection on the year, respectively.

**Structure of Listening Sessions.** An entire class session in the normal course of the program will be dedicated to this listening session. Though sizes of Confirmation programs vary, breaking students up into groups of roughly ten (and not more than fifteen) will likely be most effective, so that only one or two catechists are needed per

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66. Francis, “Address of his Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod” (speech, Vatican City, October 9, 2021), Vatican.va, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html>.

group and each student is given their share of time and attention. The session's discussion questions would be similar to those asked in the Springtide report presented in the exploration section: *How do you define the sacred? Have you had any sacred experiences? How did you feel? Did this experience change you in any way?* Tougher questions regarding the Church can also be asked: *If your sacred experiences have not occurred in a place of worship, what prevents you from feeling connected/fulfilled? What is lacking here that you find in other communities and spaces?*

The catechist should be prepared to treat these questions with flexibility and curiosity, engaging students in a conversation rather than a rote question and answer pattern. A primary concern of this project is acknowledging that young people's language can fall outside the bounds of religious tradition and institution. As such, the catechist must be sensitive to the nature of the students' responses. If they seem disengaged or confused, the catechist should be prepared to alter their language, swapping in terms like "higher power," "spiritual," or even more relational language like "interconnectedness" or "bigger than yourself." It may be useful to frame the conversation with definitions for some of these terms. As mentioned above, Springtide used the following definition for "sacred" to guide their research with Gen Z: "those things, places, or moments that feel special and set apart from others—experiences that evoke a sense of wonder, awe, gratitude, deep truth, and/or interconnectedness."<sup>67</sup>

**Goal of Parent Presentation.** The goal of the parent presentation, led by the youth minister and catechists, is to assist parents in engaging their teen's spiritual life and to give them a sense of the language their child uses in this area, as well as the experiences and spaces that their child holds sacred. It should be emphasized to parents that, though such a meeting might seem unconventional, this is a valuable opportunity to gain insight into how their children view and describe the transcendent. The hope is that families will use what they learn in the parent presentation to inform how they approach their child's sacramental preparation and spiritual development beyond Confirmation.

**From Listening Session to Parent Presentation.** During the first listening session, students will also be given the opportunity to write their responses on a worksheet with all the questions, to be anonymously shared at a presentation with parents several weeks later. (The students should, of course, be alerted to this and be given the opportunity to decline.) To further ensure anonymity, in a two-year Confirmation program where the

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67. Springtide Research Institute, *Exploring the Sacred*, 6.

first- and second-year Confirmation students do not overlap in their classes, response sheets from each year can be mixed up or even swapped. In addition to randomizing worksheets, responses should be typed up ahead of time if possible so that handwriting is not recognized.

**Timing of Parent Presentation.** The parent presentations will ideally take place at a time that can reasonably be accommodated into parents' and guardians' routines, likely while their children are in their Confirmation classes. The presentation should occur within just a few weeks of the listening session, so that catechists who help facilitate the presentation have their conversations with the students fresh in their minds.

**Structure of Parent Presentation.** This can vary significantly depending on the size and resources of the Confirmation program, as well as the amount of time that can feasibly be dedicated to this presentation. It will depend on the youth minister to evaluate what type of format is most effective, whether it is breaking parents up into smaller groups, like the listening sessions, or convening the entire group of parents for a presentation, which may include a "keynote" speaker with breakout discussions.

Whatever format is selected, the intention is to highlight the actual responses provided by Confirmation students during their listening sessions. Care for the young people in this program includes respecting their privacy and confidentiality, so discretion and advance preparation will be key. As mentioned above, students should be made aware of the possibility that their answers will be shared in the parent presentation and given the option to decline to provide their written responses. In deciding what answers to incorporate in the presentation, the youth minister and catechists should consider selecting questions that have relatively anonymous responses. Questions such as, "Can you describe a sacred/spiritual experience?" can garner detailed responses that identify the "who, what, where, when, how." It can be just as fruitful to talk to parents about prompts whose answers may seem vague. *Where do you feel most connected to a higher power?* "I feel connected to God when I am surrounded by nature." *How did you feel during your spiritual experience?* "I felt intense gratitude for being alive." The point of the parent presentation is not to catch their child's particular answers, but rather for families to gain insight into the spiritual "toolkit" that is used by their child and their peers.

Of course, reading out these responses from the listening sessions is not a substantive presentation in itself. Rather, it should be used to supplement the main content of the presentation. Again, this is where the youth minister must identify the needs of the Confirmation families. If the goal of the presentation is to aid parents in understanding their child's spiritual language and experiences, the youth minister needs to ask themselves the question: *to what extent are the parents in the program connected to their child's spiritual formation?* Do families attend Mass and parish activities together, or are the faces of young people notably absent? This requires discernment on the part of the youth minister and catechists, and perhaps consulting with a few Confirmation families, to determine what resources and content would be most useful to the parents who have primary responsibility for their child's spiritual growth.

The youth minister must also understand the cultural and socioeconomic landscape of the parish and Confirmation program and include this in their discernment. Where financially viable, the faith formation department could engage a speaker, whether theologian, sociologist, psychologist, or even a youth minister from another parish or school, who has expertise on the spiritual landscape of Gen Z and can offer up their research, publications, or ministerial experience. It may be that a lecture format in a large group is ineffective for various reasons and parents could benefit from a sharing session of their own. If the Confirmation program is a shared parish (in which two or more cultural groups are present), the youth minister may want to consider a breakout group format in which conversations are facilitated by catechists or other pastoral ministers who are fluent in the languages represented within the parish. If many of the teens come from immigrant families, there may be additional communication and cultural barriers between parent and child that a fluent catechist could help bridge. In a more intimate space and small group setting, parents and catechists could exchange ideas and concerns about



how their teens' spiritual lives seem to be faring, and what the parish can provide to better support its families.

If the particular needs of the Confirmation families result in a listening session of their own, it would be beneficial to begin by asking the parents the same questions that were posed to the students.<sup>68</sup> Catechists should remain attentive to these responses, taking notes and making connections between parents' responses and those of the students—we will return to this shortly. As facilitators transition from parent responses to sharing student responses, the goal of the parent presentation should be reiterated: to provide parents with insight into their child's spiritual language and to cultivate further understanding between parent and child. When catechists share student responses, they should point out any similarities or differences that they observed. For instance, a notable observation might be that many parents' sacred place is a church or chapel, while students find the sacred in nature. Parents' spiritual experiences may take place during silent prayer or meditation, while students consider concerts or a bonfire with friends sacred experiences. Similar emotions may arise in both groups in relation to the sacred and spiritual, such as feeling loved and connected to others.

If the students' physical worksheets are available (with the necessary adjustments that allow students to remain anonymous, such as typing up and randomizing responses, as noted above), the catechist could distribute a worksheet to each parent. Parents would be given a few minutes to silently read and reflect on the worksheet, then return to the larger group to share. Catechists would then lead a group discussion. *How did this student's answers differ from your own? Were any of the answers surprising to you? Do you struggle with any of these responses,*

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68. In the context of a shared parish, this may shed light on the religious devotions and figures that are unique to certain cultures, which has the added benefit of promoting intercultural encounter among families.

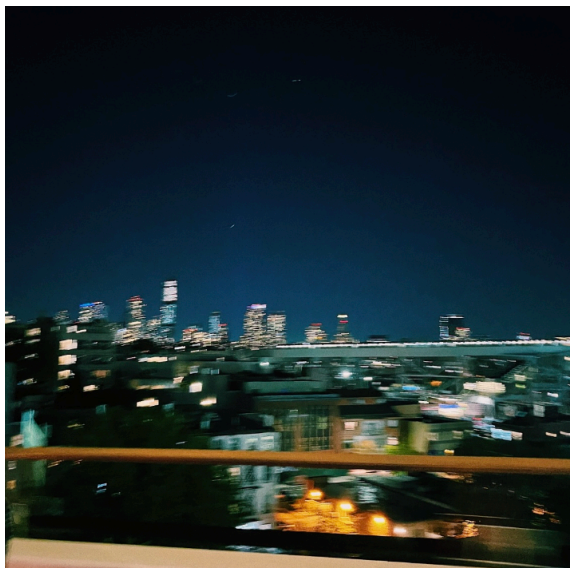
*or do they resonate with you?* Like the student listening session, the catechist can also broach “tougher” questions that require more thought and even vulnerability. *If the student seems to struggle with traditional places and communities of worship, what would you want to tell them? What spiritual practices or activities might you recommend to them to make these spaces and groups more approachable? Do you and your children ever discuss questions like these?* The purpose of questions like these is to demonstrate to parents how the presentation and student responses can begin to be applied at home.

Lastly, a brief word about the second listening session and its contrast to the first, as well as the importance of this program for pastoral ministers themselves. Because the second listening session comes at the end of a school year, presumably, and just before receiving the sacrament of Confirmation for second-year students, this is an optimal time for reflection. Catechists can guide the conversation through the lens of any retreats, service projects, or social activities included during the program, and teens may find that their Confirmation program has indeed provided encounters with the sacred, as well as the language to describe them. The second listening session can also function as something of a “course evaluation” for catechists, in which they can privately observe where the program seemed to be fulfilling teens’ spiritual curiosity and yearnings. In addition to better understanding young people, questions such as those pertaining to their relationship with the Church and what they feel is lacking in their faith community also present an opportunity for introspection among the catechists facilitating the discussion. Ultimately, the intention of these listening sessions is to live the call to be a listening Church by creating a space, in the process of sacramental preparation, in which young people can freely share their spiritual language and experiences, without pressure or obligation to offer anything other than their authentic selves.

### **Conclusion: An Authentic Pastoral Care**

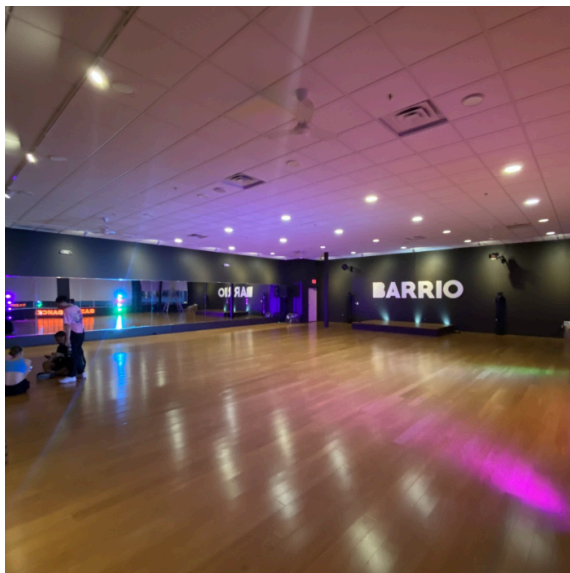
This paper takes inspiration from deep relationships with friends and encounters with peers who are each on their unique spiritual journeys and have their own particular yearnings, many of which fall outside the definitions of institutional religion or the walls of a church. Such stories may be unfamiliar to us or surprising, but they are no less valid. My hope is that this paper has demonstrated that real pastoral care is not wishing young people would magically reappear at Sunday liturgies or griping that what they do believe in is a sort of hodgepodge spirituality. True pastoral care for young people should not involve changing them but rather advising and accompanying them, though the ultimate goal may still be welcoming them with open arms into the Church. The immediate charge in front of us, especially if we feel that we are actively losing young people in our pews, is to listen and learn. If they feel excluded or hurt by the Church, the most culture-shifting thing we can do is to make their presence, their stories, feel seen and valued. The research we explored in this paper informed us that young people characterize the sacred as “personal, relational, and extraordinary.” May we never lose sight of this in our encounters with young people, allowing this knowledge and their experiences to enrich our spiritual lives and pastoral care—for the extraordinary can be found in all places and all persons.

## Appendix



### Age 17

The photo I chose is the New York City skyline at night off of the Gowanus Highway. Nothing fills me with more peace and comfort than coming home after a long night, and the skyline saying goodnight to me. I feel God's safety and comfort in that view and it is something the whole world should see. The pure joy I feel is immeasurable and incomparable to anything other than being at peace. That peace is something I accredit to God. Without Him, I wouldn't be at peace, and without Him, there would be nothing to cause that feeling.



### Age 20

This space is a photo I took of the dance studio I work in. This is my sacred space. This is my area to release my emotions, be creative, connect with others, let go of my worries, and fulfill my passion for movement.



## Age 17

This is a picture of me and my sister's names carved into the sidewalk of my old house. Every few years this slab of sidewalk would have to be replaced because it would always crack either from storms or just bad weather. When we first moved into the house in 2012 we started this tradition. It ended when we moved in 2021 and our names are still on the sidewalk, immortalizing the bond that we share.



## Age 17

The photo I submitted is a photo of orange bows. Even though they don't look like much they have a lot of meaning. The photo was taken at my friend's funeral. I find this image sacred because she was someone who always spread love and happiness. She was someone who I always have and always will hold close to my heart. After she passed, anything orange that might not be seen every day (such as a butterfly or an orange flower) reminds me of her and it reminds me that she was everything but ordinary.



## Age 17

In this photo, it is my dog, Apollo. In the photo, he is just happy to play with a ball in his mouth. While I am happy to see him happy. This moment is sacred to me because of the feeling of friendship. The bond between us is special, no one can replace it. I feel as though even if I were to be alone, I always have him by my side. Just his presence is enough to keep me out of my darkness. Just like how God looks over me, I feel that I look over and love him.



## Age 16

I've been growing my own plants since kindergarten, including those ones in that pot. As I watched how these plants developed and eventually perished, I was able to experience the mysteries of life and death. It began like my faith did, as a sprout. When neglected, my faith slowly died, just like those plants did and vice versa. Those plants have served as a kind of metaphor for who I am. My spiritual journey took different turns with each sprout. From the sound foundations of the past to the present, these plants will always hold inherent sacred value to me.

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