Young, Adult, and Catholic

A Wonderful Complexity

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The crucial importance of ministry to young adult Catholics urges us to examine what sociologists and psychologists can contribute to our understanding of the patterns of development of this age group today. The author shows how this information can assist our working out pastoral strategies to make Christ more vividly present to them.

Various ideas of what constitutes Catholic identity in the United States in the twenty-first century coexist at the present time. “What makes one Catholic?” is a much-asked question, and facile answers abound. Some identify as “Catholic” one who rigidly adheres to certain teachings, or simply claims to be a disciple of Christ, or strictly observes rituals. However, the formation of a Catholic identity is always a complex process.

There is an identity crisis among many Catholics in the postconciliar church. One particularly important group for all Catholics to understand is young adults. Thirty percent of Americans decide between their twenty-fifth and fortieth birthdays to become regular churchgoers (Greeley, 1990), and many more make significant decisions in their early and mid-twenties about continuing the original religious identification and devotional levels of their late teens.

The study by Hoge and others (2001) of young adult Catholics shows how difficult it is to find consensus in the Catholic Church in the United States about where young adults are on their faith journeys. We do know that the transition from late adolescence to young adulthood surfaces a wealth of information since that is when young people are asking critical questions such as “Who am I?” and

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“Whom do I love?” How the “young, adult, and Catholic” person answers these questions and expresses other dreams and desires deserves thoughtful analysis, if we are to understand the role of faith in their development.

In this essay I will explore what it means to be young, adult, and Catholic, and how this knowledge should affect pastoral ministry to them. Using Erik Erikson’s theory of identity formation, I will also rely on James Marcia’s identity status research. Finally, using the approach of “discovering a way of life” to translate some of the psychosocial categories of Erikson and Marcia, I will offer some pastoral observations for keeping the vitality of this age group before us as we discover anew the wonderful complexity of what it means to grow up.

Young and Adult: Identity Formation

Becoming a Christian is a lifelong process, and the leitmotif of the Gospel is the call to conversion. Erikson (1963) provides a classic overview describing the process of human growth and development across a typical lifespan, from birth to death or from “bust to dust” as his students referred to it. As late adolescents negotiate an understanding of where they fit into peer groups, school structures, and parental requirements, they are also lured to explore the challenges and opportunities of the adult world. For Erikson, the stabilizing of identity is both the major personality achievement of late adolescence and a critical component of a productive, happy, adult life. Identity construction involves defining who you are, what you value, and the directions you choose to pursue in life. Many late teens undergo an identity crisis, a temporary period of uncertainty and confusion, as they experiment with alternatives before settling on a set of values or goals, though to some it is more an exploration than a crisis. During later adolescence, young men and women undertake various trial-and-error activities before they integrate goals, dreams, and desires into an organized self-structure (Marcia, 1980).

Immediately after the period of late adolescence come the challenging early adult years (typically the early twenties to the mid-thirties). The primary developmental task now is to achieve a sense of intimacy and the ability to be in an open and caring relationship with another person without fear of losing one’s own identity. This is a time to learn whom one cares to be with and then, over the course of a lifetime, how to love and care for those significant persons.

Occupation and Ideology: Identity Domains

Especially relevant during the period of identity formation is the interplay between an occupation and an ideology, two variables that impact upon the
grace of conversion. These are paramount for Erikson in that they focus attention on the idealism of youth (Erikson uses the word ideology) still present in late adolescent identity formation and the concomitant need to balance this idealism with meaningful work. He contends that it is primarily the inability to settle on an occupational identity that disturbs young people. Erikson also argues that to envisage a future, the young adult needs “a religion” and a clear comprehension of life in light of an intelligible theory (ideology). An ideology for Erikson is “something between a theory and a religion.” It can be placed on a continuum: unbridled exuberance for an ideal at one end and an overidentification with the status quo at the other. The moorings of adolescence shake loose and the task of finding one’s own values and beliefs now becomes salient. Some confusion is inevitable in this process as one chooses, conforms to, or rejects a religious tradition.

Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1974) describes religion as (a) a set of symbols that purports to explain the uniquely real; (b) a collection of rituals; (c) a community that is constituted by and transmits these symbols and rituals; (d) a heritage of beliefs; and (e) a differentiation from those who are not part of the heritage by relational or familial affiliation. This framework is helpful, and supports Erikson’s notion of identity formation. For example, some might associate a religious tradition primarily with a collection of rituals or a heritage of beliefs but leave out the important aspect of transmitting these rituals and beliefs in meaningful ways. When viewed in Geertz’s framework, ritual and belief account for only one of the myriad ways young adults understand living within a religious tradition. But identity formation issues are no less important in the shaping of Catholic identity.

**Exploration and Commitment: Identity Status**

In addition to occupation and ideology, Erikson identifies two further variables in identity formation: exploration and commitment. They provide a fuller picture of what happens as the youth, seeking personal investment, chooses among many alternatives. It also shows that individual young adults may be at widely different points in the process of identity formation.

Exploration can serve as a measure of the way an individual looks into and experiments with alternative directions and beliefs. Commitment refers to choices made from among several alternative paths. Using these two variables, Marcia (1966, 1980) began by interviewing college students and observed four clusters or identity statuses, which categorize distinct ways later adolescents and early adults engage identity formation. His work provides a window into the way late adolescents and young adults shift from one status to another through a process.
of exploration and commitment. The four statuses which we will examine here are: identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion (Marcia, 1994).

**Identity Achievement**

Identity-achieved individuals have undergone the exploratory process and made occupational and ideological commitments. Resolved and resilient, they are now able to describe their choices and express the reasons for them. They are typically sensitive to external demands and make their decisions based on internalized and identified values that they can make their own. They tend to have more peaceful relationships with their families and even appreciate the differences that exist within the family system. They perform well under stress, reason at high levels of moral development, are relatively resistant to self-esteem manipulation, and appear to have internalized self-regulatory processes (Marcia, 1980).

Two common examples of identity-achieved personalities are helpful. The first is the high school senior who has engaged the process of “college shopping” by seriously exploring all his choices and reasons for and against certain schools. At the end of the process he chooses what school seems best and makes a wholehearted attempt to meet all the requirements for acceptance. The second is the college senior who wrestles with her desire to find her first full-time job or serve in a volunteer program similar to the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. After thoughtful discernment and information gathering she makes a decision and moves forward with the plan of action.

**Identity Moratorium**

The moratorium status represents almost total exploration, but is a transitional position, since most people move on to the achievement position (Marcia, 1994). People in moratorium are often intense, active and lively, struggling, engaging, and occasionally exhausting! They seize the opportunity to use family, teachers, and friends as sounding boards for expressing and working out their current dilemmas. “Moratoriums” characteristically make no commitments because the exploratory process defines their basic approach to life. They often deal with fundamental questions to which there is really no one right answer and laboriously ponder significant issues at the expense of decision making (which is required for identity achievement). *Time* magazine devoted its January 24, 2005, cover story to “The Twixters,” a group who fit this moratorium status quite well. This phenomenon will be revisited later in this essay.

**Identity Foreclosure**

The third status, identity foreclosure, is marked by commitment but with an absence of exploration. The commitment generally reflects the wishes of parents or other authority figures. “Foreclosures” are usually neat, well-organized, goal
directed, clean, and well behaved. They prefer to be told what to do by an acceptable authority figure rather than to determine their own directions. They are inflexible in their thought processes, tend to espouse moral values at the level of Kohlberg’s (1978) “Law and Order,” are generally obedient and conforming, and deal with negative information about themselves by either a façade of acceptance or active resistance. “Foreclosures” have little doubt about what is right and they tend to choose as friends and partners people who are very much like them. Typical “foreclosed” individuals might affiliate with a particular political party simply because their parents do so.

Identity Diffusion

The final category is the identity-diffused individual. Such persons may engage in some cursory and intermittent exploration, but remain uncommitted. There are two typical personality types here: the socially isolated and apathetic, and the interpersonally frivolous. “Whereas the description of the foreclosure family could provide material for a full-color government brochure on the happy, healthy family, the description of the diffusion family is more dismal” (Marcia, 1994:76). Family interpersonal relationships are either sparse or extraordinarily shallow for the identity diffused. These individuals may also experience mental health challenges more acutely than the other statuses.

Emerging Adulthood: A New Identity Phenomenon

Recent research on “emerging adulthood” has extended the applicability of Marcia’s work, especially for Western and industrialized cultures. The essential qualities of emerging adulthood are described as (a) a period of much exploration (similar to the moratorium status), especially in the area of love and work; (b) a time of instability; (c) a very self-focused period in the life span; (d) a transition time in which one is neither an adolescent nor an adult; and (e) a time of endless possibility where hope leading to the opportunity for transformation abounds (Arnett, 2004). Arnett, the leading researcher in this area, carefully avoids calling this group late adolescents or early adults because of the unique features that are present in these individuals.

We are all aware of the difficulty of defining (or delimiting) the potential members of a “young adult group” in most parishes. No wonder Britney Spears’ song “I’m Not A Girl, Not Yet A Woman” is an apt anthem for this emerging adulthood phenomenon.

Emerging adulthood in our contemporary experience is an interstitial period when possibilities are endless and the social pressure to make lasting commitments among these choices is low. The refrain for emerging adults is “keep
options open” because a better offer is likely to come their way. To elucidate the emerging adulthood phenomenon further, I refer to two recent articles.

(A) The Utne Reader introduces the concept of a “quarterlife crisis”:

Oprah dedicated a show to it, bloggers have raved about it, and punk bands on both coasts have named themselves after it. It even has its own shelf in the self-help section of the bookstore. There’s no question that the “quarterlife crisis”—a term referring to the emotional upheaval experienced by many in their 20s—has morphed beyond a catchy phrase into a bonafide social trend. Some even predict that it will eclipse midlife as the crisis du jour (Thomas, 71).

(B) Time magazine describes “Twixters” as young people between the ages of 18 and 25 (and beyond) as a distinct group in a “never-never land between adolescence and adulthood in which people stall for a few extra years, putting off the iron cage of adult responsibility that constantly threatens to crash down on them. They’re betwixt and between. You could call them Twixters” (Grossman, 44). Statistics indicate that on average, the four-year college sojourn is a thing of the past; it now takes five years to complete an undergraduate degree. The effort devoted to finding a meaningful occupation and concomitant affiliation to some sort of ideology is protracted because of time spent paying off college loans, reducing credit-card debt from frivolous college spending, and the amount of time and energy these Twixters may devote to advanced degrees.

Thus, the delaying of the traditional rites of passage that marked the movement from adolescence to adulthood (graduating from a school, getting a job and developing a career, settling into a relationship) is prevalent in this group of emerging adults. Gail Sheehy (1995), a respected research voice in the field of human development, opines that the old demarcation points for adulthood scheduled to begin at 21 and end at 65 are hopelessly out-of-date. She reports that people today are leaving childhood sooner, taking longer to grow up, and resisting growing old! Fresh, new images—as in Sheehy’s metaphor of “mapping one’s life over time,” Arnett’s emerging adulthood, the designation of a quarterlife crisis, and the Twixters phenomenon—are now surfacing to dramatize the wonderful complexity of human development and why it does not easily fit into neat and tidy categories.

**Being Catholic: Discovering a “Way of Life”**

Erikson maintained that the inability to settle on an occupational identity disturbs many young people. Frustrated by the massive and creative effort required to meet today’s search for meaningful employment and then a sense of participation and belonging, young Catholics from “identity-achieved” to
“identity-diffused” may be distanced from the church at a time when the spirituality, drama, and poetry of their church can be a help in their quest for identity and intimacy. Writing decades ago, Erikson may not have imagined that his two domains of identity formation (occupation and ideology) would be as difficult to balance as it has proved. As “exploration” is prolonged, so identity achievement is deferred by a late teen or an emerging adult. “Moratorium”—or even diffused identity status—is increasingly characteristic of young people. This group does seem to enjoy life by taking more time than in the past to complete school, look for a job (not the ideal job but any job), pay the bills, or drag their feet moving from the parents’ house. But, lest this sound like an indictment, there is a very positive side of all this—the young adult can use this time for serious soul-searching and the pondering of love and work issues.

Some of the major obstacles to the forging of a Catholic identity seem to be the experience of bland rituals, prayers, symbols, creeds, and beliefs. Contemporary popular culture (media-defined) subtly flaunts the recognizable characteristics of an ideology, or way of life, and favors fads and trendy lifestyles. The danger is that a lifestyle (Erikson’s occupation) disconnected from a “way of life” (Erikson’s ideology) will be indefinitely prolonged and fail to provide a framework for living life meaningfully and deeply. The shibboleth “I’m really into this!” masquerades the utterly shallow feelings that surface when the first lifestyle disappointment around “what one is into” is encountered. Some young adults may become addicted to entertainment, distraction, and amusement. Their false selves offer ample reason to run free and reign supreme. Their mantra is “try on another lifestyle” so that they can “be into something” again!

In contradistinction to a lifestyle, a way of life is a way of relating to God, one’s self, and others which is recognizable and respected by those whom society regards as mature. The benefit of committing to a religious tradition, as described by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is that it can bind and shape an individual to a community. Becoming a Christian comes from a daily choice to grow into the person one is destined to be by God. A lifestyle may leave me dangerously on the sidelines as a spectator of the life I am called to live; but a way of life situates me in a dynamic community of others whose needs, like mine, for the proclamation of God’s eternal love can be met. Theologian Robert Barron, in his very practical book The Strangest Way, (p. 13), says that the earliest term
used to describe Christianity was the “simple but evocative word ‘way’” from Acts 9:2. He captures the dimensions of what that “way” means: clear and distinct practices, rituals, prayers, symbols, creeds, and beliefs that constitute what can be labeled a Christian culture. A way of life challenges our daily living, it constricts and tethers us but it does this in exciting ways!

In conclusion, I offer three pastoral observations to keep the vitality of identity formation before us as we discover anew that wonderful complexity posed by the triadic mixture of young, adult, and Catholic as a top priority for pastoral ministry.

A Pastoral Agenda

Observation One—The Data

An important observation for pastoral ministry with young adults is that they are not uniform in their concerns, feelings, and attitudes in reference to church. Some of them may be emerging or Twixters, and vary on the spectrum from identity-achieved to identity-diffused. I suggest we begin where we are and not where we want to be in terms of proposing a pastoral agenda for this multifaceted group. The study by Hoge and others found, among many demographic variables, that young Catholics are not leaving the church in droves; they maintain a healthy balance between suspicion and criticism of the church, and they are not all right of center on some teachings. A USCCB publication (1997), addressed to young adults and those in leadership positions working with them, acknowledges that young adult ministry is left wanting in many dioceses. Recognizing that young adults are developmentally poised to begin looking at choices and commitments relative to their Catholic identity, it is incumbent on those in young adult ministry to address the myriad ways religion, through ritual and symbol, speaks to everyday life. Also, in a world beleaguered by terrorism, young Catholics ought to reference Catholic social teaching to address these realities and then learn how to support ecumenical and interfaith efforts.

A 2004 poll of CARA, which looked at Mass attendance in the United States, showed that slightly more than one in five post-Vatican II generation Catholics (between ages 18 and 40) said they attended Mass at least once a week or more. By comparison, 52 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics and 38 percent of Vatican II generation Catholics reported weekly Mass attendance. Ronald Rolheiser notes that even though Mass attendance seems to be dropping, the churches themselves have great staying power:

Most people who are not at church on Sunday are not at home brooding about the church's faults. . . . They are sleeping, shopping, skiing, jogging in the park, watching baseball and football games, working on their lawns and gardens,
and visiting with family and friends. They are on sabbatical. They want a kingdom, not a church (p. 113).

The pastoral challenge here is to present the experience of community to young adults as one in which the day-to-day rub of life is necessary for transmitting the symbols and rituals for a Catholic identity. The sacraments may become sterile rituals for this group if they are only showing up for baptisms, weddings, and funerals; and the concerns of the Gospel may be irrelevant to them if their energies are not better harnessed.

**Observation Two—Magical Thinking**

Much religion is taught in childhood when magical thinking surrounds early faith development. Alongside the childhood notions of Jesus Christ, the ideas of Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, monsters under the bed, and “grown-ups knowing best” abound. Adolescence is the time for leaving these ideas behind, but all too frequently childhood understandings of God remain! Those working with young adults are often in a position to re-present religion and help them grow into more mature disciples who still exhibit childlike wonder but reason with an adult-like faith.

The pastoral challenge here is to help young adults move beyond the magical modes of childhood thinking to a more mature, relational, and adult faith. As one reaches late adolescence and young adulthood, a caution is not to throw the bathwater out with the baby: the baby is the younger, magical-thinking self, and the bathwater is the comfort and cleansing of coming to know oneself as a child of God. Also, mature notions of faith that enrich one’s worldview and experience are now possible. The maturity of young adults is enriched when they are introduced to an image of God as one who invites and calls into relationship and not one who simply rewards and punishes.

**Observation Three—Heart of Faith Is Jesus Christ**

Imagine the difference between an identity-foreclosed student and an identity-achieved student grappling with the rich tradition of Catholic moral teaching. A “foreclosed” person would acquiesce when authority insists that the tradition of the church should be accepted without criticism. Contrast the “achieved” person, negotiating the primacy of relationship with Jesus Christ. Imagine, too, that a pastoral minister is in moratorium: the image of church he or she communicates may seem full of hopeful opportunities but hopelessly out of touch with the realities of everyday parish life. The pastoral challenge in such cases is to present the faith as a way of life that does in fact respond to the longings of young adults for ideology and occupation.

To develop an understanding that one is a child of God and a disciple of Jesus Christ and then called to give and receive love is the starting point for a Catholic
identity. Building upon this basic conviction, one begins to discover that his or her life is for others, and that giving one's life for others is the way to come to the resolution of the two identity questions extending from late adolescence into young adulthood: “Who am I?” and “Whom do I Love?” The lurking danger in answering these questions is that the response will come solely from catechisms or rubrics and not primarily from the depths of the mystery of the revelation of the person of Christ.

Conclusion

The nexus between a theoretical model of psychosocial identity formation and the realities of many young adult Catholics may offer helpful insights to pastoral ministers. The relative lack of programs and offerings for young adult Catholics and the complexities of meeting their needs provide challenges for all who are working in educational, campus ministry, catechetical, faith formation, and parish settings. Using the insights of identity status to focus attention on the various ways young adults are exploring and committing to the way of life that is Christianity may prove helpful for those who want to take this group seriously as members of the Body of Christ.

References


