Do young adults have “a Catholic imagination?” Is there an identifiable “sacramental imagination” among them? What are the surveys and polls telling us? In this article Ryan uncovers the data and suggests important ways for the church to respond.

Much has been written in recent years about the religious attitudes and aspirations of young adults. It is clear that many Catholics are concerned about what they perceive to be the distancing of young adults from the institutional church. In a 2003 poll, more than half of Catholics surveyed said that the lack of participation by young adults is a serious problem for the church (D’Antonio et al., 77). They listed this concern as one of the three most serious problems faced by the U.S. Catholic Church, along with the clergy sexual abuse scandal and the decline in vocations to religious life and the priesthood. In his recent study of young adults from all religious backgrounds, Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow compares them to young adults of the 1970s. He concludes that “young adults are less likely to participate in religious services than they were a generation ago” (Wuthnow, 214). He describes himself as “troubled” by his findings about the religious involvement of young U.S. Americans. It is evident that the challenges set before the Catholic Church with regard to eliciting young adult participation are also faced by other religious groups.

I am currently involved with young adults in two settings: the theology classroom, where I teach systematic theology to graduate students, and through young

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adult conferences that I direct as part of the Catholics on Call program. Catholics on Call is a national vocation discovery program at Catholic Theological Union that is funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. It is directed toward men and women, ages eighteen to thirty (the younger end of the “young adult” category) who are exploring a call to serve in the church as a lay minister, religious brother or sister, or priest. At conferences and follow-up retreats, as well as through our website, I am privileged to meet young men and women of faith who are discerning God’s call in their lives. While Catholics on Call attracts young adults who exhibit a strong faith commitment, these men and women reflect the hopes and the struggles of many of their peers. They also manifest the theological diversity present among today’s Catholic young adults.

The Broader Context

One salient feature of contemporary U.S. society is the postponement of tasks normally associated with emergence into adulthood. Young adult men and women are marrying later in life and becoming parents later than their parents and grandparents did. They are also having fewer children. Because active involvement in religious congregations tends to increase with marriage and parenting, Wuthnow highlights this postponement as a significant factor in the diminishment of young adult participation in institutional religion (Wuthnow, 21–28). According to statistics compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau, today men and women get married about four years later on average than in 1965. In 1976, 10 percent of women ended their childbearing years without children; by the year 2000 that figure had increased to 19 percent. The proportion of women with four or more children declined from 36 percent to 11 percent. Wuthnow observes that “fewer young adults are focusing on the responsibilities of being parents and emphasizing values they want their children to learn” (Wuthnow, 49). This extended period of single life and vocational exploration is clearly influencing active involvement in faith communities. Statistics show that young men and women who are married with children have more stability in their lives and are more interested in joining faith communities and participating actively in them.

Young adults also change jobs—and even careers—quite often. This mobility influences their lifestyles and their ability to settle down in a community. The days of the “company” man or woman seem to be over. This is due not so much to a lack of commitment on the part of young adults as to corporate strategies involving relocation, downsizing, and outsourcing. Wuthnow cites one study that indicated that two-thirds of workers in their twenties had been at their present job for fewer than three years. Almost half of these employees had already been in three different lines of work. As Wuthnow notes, such high turnover and mobility make long-range commitment difficult for young adults (Wuthnow, 30–32).
Coupled with this fluidity of jobs and careers is the financial pressure felt especially by married young adults. The rise in dual-income families has been widely reported. Women are much more likely to be working outside the home and to be employed full time than a generation ago. While the majority of young adults are not poor, they are among the age cohorts most likely to be poor. Moreover, recent statistics indicate that they are experiencing lower wage growth and greater inequality than young adults a generation earlier (Wuthnow, 35). While economic factors are not entirely determinative of religious behavior, they do suggest that many men and women in their twenties and thirties, especially married couples, are experiencing financial pressures. This means, too, that they have less time to devote to involvement in their parish or other congregation.

The influence of the internet on the religious behaviors of young adults is more difficult to ascertain. Some older adults are under the impression that e-mail and blogs have taken the place of personal interaction, leaving young adults isolated in front of their computers. My own experience with young adults suggests that, while they value opportunities for online communication with friends and family, they generally do not see such interaction as a substitute for face-to-face encounter. They utilize services like Facebook and MySpace, but they still yearn for community. One of the recurring comments among Catholics on Call participants is their appreciation for the opportunity to get to know like-minded peers who are also serious about vocational discernment. They value community and want to remain in contact with the people they have met. Wuthnow’s research corroborates these impressions. He finds that seeing friends and relatives and talking with them by telephone remain the means by which young adults maintain the widest circle of contacts. E-mail involves a smaller number of contacts. He also indicates that frequent church attenders keep in contact with a larger number of people than do those who attend church infrequently (Wuthnow, 208). With regard to religious use of the internet, statistics indicate that young adults utilize the Web to find information about faith traditions, download religious music, and purchase religious books. But there is no evidence that the internet is replacing church involvement. Generally, young adults who frequent religious websites do so in addition to their participation in faith communities, not as a replacement for such involvement.

From a Catholic perspective, it is important to remember that today’s young adults did not experience the Catholic subculture in the United States that middle-aged
and older Catholics knew so well. They grew up in a period when Catholics in the U.S. had already become integrated into the mainstream of society and were fast becoming the most affluent Christians of any denomination. In a lecture on Catholic identity and evangelization, ecclesiologist Richard Gaillardetz noted that Catholics under forty “were not raised in a developed Catholic subculture that communicated a thick and enduring sense of Catholic identity. Their world is characterized not by the suffocating insularity and rigidity of immigrant Catholicism, but by the disorienting free fall of postmodern religious pluralism” (Gaillardetz, 10). Cathleen Kaveny, a professor of law and theology at Notre Dame, reflects on this changed context from her own perspective as a young adult. She says, “the coherent Catholic culture of the pre–Vatican II church had broken up by the time we came along. We do not have the Catholic-in-our-bones sensibilities that characterizes both liberals and conservatives of earlier generations” (Kaveny, 19). For contemporary young adults, this altered context suggests that their bonds with the institutional church tend not to be as strong as those of previous generations. It also means, as Kaveny suggests, that many of the dimensions of the tradition that older Catholics learned “by osmosis” are not as familiar to men and women in their twenties and thirties.

Beliefs and Practices of Young Adult Catholics

Studies tell us that most young adult Catholics, even those who rarely participate in the life of the church, like being Catholic and readily identify themselves as such. Approximately 10 percent of this age group has left the Catholic Church. About two-thirds of those who have left have joined other churches, including many who have become evangelical Christians. But the other 90 percent of young adults still identify as Catholics. In a study published in 2001, researchers who surveyed young adult Catholics concluded that Catholics seem to have a “glue” that Protestants do not possess in the same way. We Catholics are more like our Jewish brothers and sisters in this regard. Young adults “see Catholicism as a basic part of their being” (Hoge et al. 2001, 219). They seem to feel this way in part because they are comfortable constructing a Catholic identity on their own terms. In a culture of choice, they are at home selecting the elements within Catholic tradition and practice that they wish to comprise their Catholic identity. These authors explain this phenomenon in these words: “For many young adults, Catholicism is not so much a binding community of discipleship as a cultural tool kit of symbolic religious/spiritual wares from which it is possible to construct a personal religious identity” (Hoge et al. 2001, 226).

There are core Catholic beliefs that most young adults readily espouse. These include belief in a personal God, the Incarnation, the resurrection and divinity of Jesus, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and devotion to Mary as the Mother of God (D’Antonio et al., 81). They also rate the call to help the poor among
the most important Catholic teachings. Their commitment to the poor tends to be expressed more in terms of charitable service than efforts to achieve more just social structures. While many young Catholics say that social action is important to them, it appears that their actual knowledge of the Catholic tradition of social justice is minimal. Young adults judge church teachings on sacramental practice, sexual and reproductive morality, the role of women in the church and society, and marriage requirements as of much less importance for their Catholic identity. Raised in a pluralistic society, they are also much less likely than older Catholics to affirm the uniqueness of the Catholic Church. And they do not place a strong emphasis on the role of the church's teaching authority.

The practice of the faith among Catholic young adults varies widely. Studies indicate that about one-quarter of young adults participate in the Eucharist on a weekly basis. More than three-fourths of younger and older Catholics say that one can be a good Catholic without going to Mass every week (D’Antonio et al., 27). Most young adults do not feel obligated to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation every year or marry in the church. They tend not to view this infrequent participation in the sacraments as a problem (D’Antonio et al., 81). Overall, young adults say that there are fewer requirements for being a good Catholic than older adults. William D’Antonio and his colleagues conclude that “the evidence suggests that young adults are only loosely tethered to the Church” (D’Antonio et al., 83).

Catholics in their twenties and thirties tend to say that the religious education they received was inadequate. They claim that their formation in the faith was long on process and short on content. Many of them valued service projects in which they were involved, though they did not always see the connection between these endeavors and what they were supposed to learn about their faith. Some young adults who are married complain that they do not know enough about their faith to explain it to their children. This judgment made by young adults themselves is confirmed by researchers who explore their knowledge of the Catholic tradition. Every study of young adult Catholics attests to this widespread theological illiteracy. For example, knowledge of the teaching and the impact of the Second Vatican Council is minimal for most young adults. Hoge and his fellow researchers offered this observation about Catholic young adults: “Their knowledge, understanding and familiarity with the

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Many of the structures that older Catholics have internalized—including methods of prayer and other spiritual practices—remain external to them. Our experience of young adults who participate in Catholics on Call programs is consonant with these observations about inadequate formation in the faith. The men and women whom we meet are among the most committed and engaged young adult Catholics one would ever encounter. The vast majority participate actively in their parish or campus ministry communities. But many of them, too, speak of their lack of familiarity with the tradition and their desire for adult formation. For example, in a discussion about religious life at one of our summer conferences, several in the group expressed their need for more structure than they see in some religious communities. Not all of those who voiced this concern were “conservative” or “traditionalist” in their theological orientation. They said that many of the structures that older Catholics have internalized—including methods of prayer and other spiritual practices—remain external to them. They need to be schooled in such disciplines and supported in the practice of them. They reminded us that we cannot take it for granted that they have learned some of the most fundamental beliefs and spiritual practices that are part of the Catholic tradition.

Are young adult Catholics more conservative in their beliefs than those who belong to the “baby boomer” generation? One sometimes hears claims to this effect. The short answer to that question is: no, not on the whole. There does, however, seem to be a reflection of that polarization among young adult Catholics that is present politically in the United States and theologically in the United States and...
Europe. In *After the Baby Boomers*, Wuthnow includes a chapter entitled “The Divided Generation.” He notes that in a survey taken in 1999 more young Americans identified their religious views as *very* conservative or *very* liberal in 1999 than in 1984. The percentage of the most conservative increased from 4 percent to 9 percent and that of the most liberal from 11 percent to 19 percent. Wuthnow concludes that contemporary young adults are more divided in their religious orientation than they were in the 1980s (Wuthnow, 160–61). Curiously, he reports that about a quarter of Catholics who said that their views were moderate described themselves as “traditional” Catholics, while another quarter who also said their views were moderate described themselves as “liberal” Catholics.

Much has been written about polarization in the U.S. Catholic Church. Timothy Radcliffe has spoken of the tensions within the church between “Kingdom Catholics” and “Communion Catholics” (Radcliffe, 169–71). He describes the former as those who view the church as the people of God on pilgrimage to the kingdom of God. The latter group understands the church as comprised of those who are members of the institution, the communion of believers. Robert Schreiter, while using different nomenclature, argues similarly in speaking of two “faces of catholicity” in the contemporary church: those who understand catholicity as extension of the church throughout the world and those who view catholicity as the fullness of the faith (Schreiter). There are young adults who espouse each of these positions, as well as many who fall in between or even outside these categories. There appears to be just as much theological diversity among young adults as there is among older adults.

I believe that what leads some to conclude that young adult Catholics are conservative in their views is that ecclesial ministers frequently encounter the segment that is traditionalist in its beliefs and practices, since they tend to be actively involved in the life of the church. The authors of *American Catholics Today* comment on this group in reporting that “a sizable minority of young adults are very spiritual and highly religious” (D’Antonio et al., 81). They estimate this group to consist of about 20 percent of young adult Catholics, though I suspect that this figure may be too high. These young adults participate in the Eucharist regularly, go to confession occasionally, read the Scriptures and think of themselves as “orthodox.” They tend to be actively concerned about the poor. “They see themselves as the future of the Church and are naturally offended when others describe young adults as a problem” (81). If only a quarter of all young adult Catholics attend Mass every
week, those who are more traditionalist in their theological orientation will comprise a disproportionate percentage of active participants. Moreover, it is clear that many seminarians and young priests exhibit this traditionalist approach to Catholicism.

Recent studies show, however, that the overall population of Catholic young adults is not moving in this traditionalist direction. In fact, D’Antonio and his colleagues point out that the views and practices of many younger priests are moving in the opposite direction of the majority of young adult Catholics. In their study of U.S. priests, Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger reported that a sizable percentage of priests twenty-five to forty-five years of age reflect what they call a “cultic” model of priesthood—a view that emphasizes the sacramental role of the priest and the need for the priest to be clearly separated from the laity (Hoge and Wenger 2003, 113–19). While the minority of young adults who are more traditionalist in their thinking tend to affirm this approach, the majority do not resonate with it. They prefer priests who operate as pastoral leaders and who willingly collaborate with the laity. Though there is a cohort of young adults who are traditionalist in their theological orientation, there are also many young adult Catholics whose faith has been nourished through activities for peace and justice, volunteer service—often with the very poor in the United States or overseas and initiatives that foster greater lay involvement in the church.

Older adults need to be careful in concluding that an appreciation for some of the church’s traditional spiritual practices is an indication of a reactionary approach to the faith or a desire to return to “pre–Vatican II” days. Eucharistic adoration is a good example. It is clear that a significant portion of active young adults are drawn to this practice. In his recent book *Googling God*, Mike Hayes, the editor of a popular Catholic young adult website, comments on this attraction to eucharistic adoration. He observes, “Adoration groups enable young people to maintain their personal piety while being in the community” (Hayes, 148). We have experienced this attraction in Catholics on Call conferences. When we failed to list adoration on a conference schedule that included a variety of liturgical experiences, our participants asked that it be added to the schedule. Though attendance was optional, almost all our conference participants joined in the experience, including many who were clearly not conservative in their theological orientation. Hayes is right: young adults appreciate adoration as an experience of quiet, peaceful prayer.
in the presence of the sacred, one that draws them into community in a nonthreatening way. In this respect, adoration is not too dissimilar from Taizé prayer, another form of prayer popular among young adults. This is just one example of the desire of many young adults to become more experientially familiar with beliefs and practices that are part of our rich Catholic heritage.

Challenges to the Church

The account given above suggests serious challenges for the church today. In his study of young adults across denominational and religious lines, Robert Wuthnow issues a clarion call for more sustained efforts to meet the needs of men and women in their twenties and thirties. He says, “We cannot hope to be a strong society if we invest resources in young people until they are eighteen or twenty and then turn them out to find their way entirely on their own” (Wuthnow, 232). With regard to the churches, he argues that unless religious leaders take younger adults more seriously, the future of American religion is in doubt (17). The authors of American Catholics Today offer similar observations about the situation of young adult Catholics. In a somewhat stark appraisal of the situation they write:

Only four in ten say the Church is the most important part—or one of the most important parts—of their lives. Only one-fourth go to Mass on a weekly basis. Less than half believe that the teaching authority claimed by the Vatican is very important. A majority disagree with Church teachings related to sexual and reproductive issues, such as birth control and abortion. A majority also reject some of the Church’s key social teachings, such as its opposition to capital punishment. And if a sizable number of young adults report that they do not understand their faith well enough to explain it to their own children, they have a problem, and so does the Church. (D’Antonio et al., 83)

Those who have studied young adult Catholics offer a number of suggestions about ways the church should address the “problem” identified by D’Antonio and his colleagues. I will simply highlight the recommendations I find to be the most important. In their 2001 study, Hoge and his colleagues urged that the church adopt a preferential option for young adult Catholics (Hoge et al. 2001, 231). Such an option should include a dynamic and sustained program of outreach to all young adults (not just married couples), especially in parish communities. The authors of American Catholics Today stress the importance of inculcating in young adults a vital sense of the church’s mission. They recommend opportunities for service experiences, including mission trips in which community can be formed. Many authors emphasize the need to promote a distinct Catholic identity among young adults in a positive way. Without adopting a sectarian approach to Christian
Experts on Catholic life, ecclesial ministers should help young adults better understand and identify with Catholicism as a way of life (Rausch, 117). In their 2001 report, Dean Hoge and his team suggest three distinctive dimensions of Catholic identity that appeal to young adults: a sense of sacramentality, the struggle for peace and justice based on elements of contemporary Catholic theology, and the centrality of community and the promotion of the common good (Hoge et al. 2001, 233). Several authors adduce the importance of community for today’s young adults and urge the creation of more small Christian communities at the parish level.

Three additional strategies, which Catholics on Call adopts in its programs, are spiritual mentoring, adult formation in the faith, and the invitation to participate in ministry. As Wuthnow demonstrates, many young adults feel the loss of institutional supports once they enter the workforce. They look for mentors who can accompany them in the important life decisions they must make. Mentoring that is offered through spiritual direction, faith-sharing groups, retreats, and conferences like those sponsored by Catholics on Call is deeply appreciated by young adults. In these settings, they experience the church walking with them through the often confusing journey of young adulthood. Young adults need to know that the church is with them in their discernment of life choices and in their desire to grow in friendship with Jesus Christ.

The necessity of adult formation in the faith should be clear from what has been stated above. Young adults want and need substantial content along with adult pedagogy. Reporting on a 2007 survey of young adults who are active in campus ministry programs and diocesan young adult ministries, Dean Hoge and Marti Jewell list as one of their key conclusions: “Whether self-identified as traditional or liberal, young adults want to know more about their faith” (Hoge and Jewell 2007, 27). This need represents an ongoing challenge for parish communities, especially those with limited financial resources. It is a challenge that should also be taken up at the diocesan level as well as in other venues like retreat centers and programs offered by religious communities. For those involved in theological education, it means that it is incumbent upon us to offer undergraduate and even graduate students a solid grounding in the Catholic tradition. This should not entail a fundamentalist approach to the faith or a rejection of critical thinking. It does require a thoughtful and sympathetic presentation of the tradition. Rausch quotes the comment of a Catholic student...
who speaks of having been better instructed in critiques of the tradition than in the tradition itself (Rausch, 75). I suspect that this student is not an exception. Theologians have become enamored of the hermeneutics of suspicion in their study and presentation of the tradition. Trends in theology like liberationist and feminist theology have unmasked the biases and oppressive dynamics that have been operative in interpretations of the tradition through the ages. This methodology has generated valuable insights for theology and the church. But if young adults are schooled in critiques of the tradition before they know what the tradition is, they will come away with a deficient and skewed understanding of their Catholic faith.

Finally, experts on Catholic young adults urge pastoral ministers and other Catholics to invite young adults to participate in the ministries of the church. They stress that young adults, especially if they are single, often feel isolated in parish communities. It is important that pastoral ministers reach out to them and invite them to become more deeply involved in the life of the parish. At Catholics on Call, we have discovered that relatively few young adults have been invited to consider a vocation to religious life, priesthood, or lay ecclesial ministry. In their 2001 study, Hoge and his team reported that only about 15 percent of young adults said they had ever been encouraged to become a vowed religious or a priest (Hoge et al. 2001, 133). We have found that when young adults are offered cogent presentations on the various vocations to ministry in the church in a pressure-free atmosphere, they come to a deeper appreciation of these possibilities and are willing to give them serious consideration. They even feel a certain excitement about the ministerial opportunities that are open to them. Young adults possess irrepressible vitality, worthy ideals, and a desire to serve. We as church need their presence, their insights, and their service. We must find new and creative ways to reach out to them and to invite them to participate actively in the life of the Catholic community.

References


