

Jeremy Langford

## Odyssey of a Young Adult Catholic

This issue of *New Theology Review* hits close to home. As a twenty-seven-year-old Catholic and a member of the so-called Generation X, I join countless others in their twenties and thirties who are keenly interested in exploring with their parish leaders (ordained and lay), families, and friends the many dimensions of what it means to believe in God, cultivate a healthy relationship with the Church, develop a life-giving spirituality, and lead a meaningful, moral life. Belief is never easy—on the one hand it makes no sense and on the other hand nothing else makes sense without it. What to *do* with our belief is an equally vexing problem, for belief requires the best of our brains and the whole of our hearts but finds its true essence and expression in service and action. The dialogue, then, between those who serve and those who are served is crucial.

Far from being an expert on matters of belief, Catholicism, culture, or my generation, I offer here my personal testimony and observations as a young Catholic who has spent a lifetime striving to achieve a closer union with God and the past five years working as an editor in Catholic publishing. I have arranged this essay into three parts: belief, religion, and action. All three are parts of the same whole, not necessarily in the order I have assigned them, and serve as paths to one another.

### BELIEF

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis distinguishes between belief and religion by using the following metaphor:

The name *Christians* was first given at Antioch (Acts xi: 26) to “the disciples,” to those who accepted the teaching of the apostles. . . . “Mere” Christianity is . . . like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into the hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. . . . It is true that some people may find they have to wait in the hall for a considerable time, while others feel certain almost at once which door they must knock at. . . . When you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall (1952:11–12).

As many others in Generation X, I have struggled to discern for myself whether or not I believe in God. Lewis's metaphor of the hall of belief leading to the rooms of religion brings to mind Jesus' words to his apostles at the Last Supper, "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms" (John 14:1-2). My own journey into and through the hall toward a particular room has been one of early Catholic initiation; profound experiences of the divine, which I call "God moments"; hours of study and reflection; and the good fortune to have as friends teachers, priests, and mentors.

#### *Getting into the Hall*

Catholicism has always been a significant part of who I am. Growing up in the Catholic Church instilled in me a worldview rooted in God and a respect for the sanctity of life. And no matter how admirable or deplorable my participation in the Church has been, I have always seen the world through Catholic eyes. Ingrained in me are *Catholic sensibilities*. I first heard this term in conjunction with a book I edited on the playwright Eugene O'Neill (Shaughnessy, 1996:3). In it the author notes that even though as an adolescent O'Neill disavowed himself of the Church all together, he constantly wrote about Catholic themes—sin and redemption, suffering and joy, forgiveness and reconciliation. No matter how hard he tried, O'Neill could not shake his Catholic view of the world. Neither can I.

Rather than move away from the Church, however, I have worked hard to move toward it. But first I had to get into the hall of belief.

#### *God Moments: A Personal Story*

An essential component to my journey of belief has been my ability to identify "God moments"—those occasions when God has been present to me whether I knew it at the time or not—at various points in my life. The God moment that comes to mind now is difficult for me to write about. But time and distance have allowed me a fresh perspective and I see more clearly God's loving hand at work in my life when I needed it most.

When I was ten and my younger brother, Josh, was eight, our parents got divorced. In what seemed a flash my brother and I said goodbye to all that we had known in South Bend, Indiana, and moved with our mother to her hometown of Minneapolis. Life then was frustrating, confusing, tense, and sad.

As the new man of the house by a mere seventeen months, I felt a keen sense of responsibility for my brother and mother. I also felt a deep sense of loss in being so far away from my father. The whole notion of "visitation" was just sinking in and it made no sense. How could I "visit" one of my parents?

As I grew accustomed to my new way of life and got back to the business of being a kid, I started to relax a bit. Once school began I worked hard to meet people and develop friendships. Just as I was starting to feel at home, one of my classmates from the neighborhood caught me after school and asked if we could walk home together. As we approached the modest townhouse my mother was renting, my acquaintance asked if he could meet my family sometime. "Well," I said rather matter of factly, "my parents are divorced and my dad lives in Indiana, where I'm from. But sometime you can meet my mom, brother, and dog if you want." "Oh," he replied before running off, "you're from a broken home." I stood there stunned. Broken home? What could that possibly mean?

Perhaps this neighbor kid—and even the whole world—knew something I was too dumb or naive to understand: children from broken homes do not make it. How could they, the very foundation from which they come gets shattered right before their eyes.

I immediately hated the whole idea of broken home. Josh and I had been told that our parents loved us and that we would be assured good relationships with them both. What was broken about that? Sure, my parents were no longer together, and there were many difficult times, but in the end we were not broken, were we?

As the words "broken home" made their way into the recesses of my wounded psyche, I walked up the stairs toward my bedroom. Upon opening the door I threw myself on my bed and started to cry.

On that lonely afternoon I spent hours staring out onto the parking lot just beneath my window. With the sun high in the sky my eyes traced the outlines of the cracked black top surface and then focused on each object that littered its surface: broken bottles, rusty cans, old newspapers, discarded toys. When that became too much I followed the useless rain gutter along the side of the leaky garage up to the roof. More litter, including a shattered mirror. The whole scene provided a perfect metaphor for how I was feeling inside.

I must have studied the parking lot for hours because I only snapped out of my quandary when I noticed the sun was setting. At that moment I felt an incredible sense of peace. The beautiful hues of orange, red, and yellow filled the sky and bathed everything in a majestic light. My mind turned back to the idea that I was from a broken home. In that instant, in my ten-year-old way, I recognized that my home would only be broken if I allowed it to be. Somehow I realized that I was more than I seemed, bigger than my situation.

Refixing my gaze on the garage roof, my eye again caught the shards of the broken mirror, now glowing in the sun's light. Like the mirror, the litter on the roof had been transformed into a thing of beauty, providing once again the perfect metaphor for how I was feeling.

Looking back now I see that as lonely as I felt at that crucial juncture in my young life, I was anything but alone. In that God moment I was able to see beyond the immediate circumstances and know that my life would be what I made it. My life has been filled with countless God moments, which have had a deep impact on my belief in and desire to pursue a path toward God.

#### *My Epiphany*

I remember clearly when I finally decided that I believe in God. It was just over five years ago. During my senior year at the University of Notre Dame, I was sitting in one of my upper-level philosophy classes listening to a detailed explanation of Immanuel Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. In this work Kant seeks to establish the supreme principle of morality, which can be summed up in his famous categorical imperative: Always act in such a way that you can also will that the maxim of your action should become a universal law. Kant claims that this is "the one supreme principle for the whole field of morals, including the philosophy of law (politics) as well as the moral requirements of duties to oneself to maintain one's personal integrity and of duties to others in one's association with them (ethics)" (1981:v).

In the midst of taking notes I suddenly wrote "I cannot not believe in God." In other words, "I believe in God." The whole idea of subscribing to a "supreme principle" of morality based solely in logic made no sense to me. It seemed clear that morality and ethics must be rooted in a supreme being, not a supreme principle. As shocking as it was, I had finally resolved my quest to decide if I believed in God or not—right in the middle of a philosophy class!

Throughout college I adored philosophy because it presupposes no other given than a thirst for knowledge. Theology, on the other hand, always frustrated me because it necessarily presupposes a *theo*, God, and I was never able to profess confidently a belief in God. On an intellectual level, belief made no sense. Yet in my heart I knew I believed in God; I simply had to tell my mind.

While I know that belief is ultimately not a matter of the mind, I remember feeling grateful when the words "I cannot not believe in God" finally came. A whole new world broke open to me.

#### *Opening the Catholic Door*

Once through the hall of belief, I entered the room of the Catholic Church. I had been in this room many times before, but not by my own choice. Like so many, my Catholic upbringing left me little room for questioning. If I took in what was taught, I had all the answers I needed. Just shut up and listen, memorize and regurgitate. But I have never had any use for such passive Catholicism. Consequently, I never felt

much attachment to the Church. It is only in recent years that I have worked hard to claim my Catholic heritage for my own, to dive into it, study it, argue with it, and rest in it.

*Navigating the River of Life Through the Eyes of Belief*

In his wonderful book *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain tells of his love for the river and his journey to becoming an expert steamboat pilot. Twain's description of how he came to see and know the river provides a perfect analogy for how we might come to see and know the sacred that flows through everyday life.

From his earliest days Twain had one permanent ambition: to be a steamboatsman. Other ambitions of all sorts came and went throughout his childhood, but he never lost his focus on the river and his dream of someday navigating a ship on it. Steamboat captains were the modern-day equivalent of "cool"—they had a way with people, they were adventurers, and they were paid handsomely for their skills. As enticing as these things were then or are today, however, Twain's passion ran deeper. Quite simply, he loved the river and wanted to be part of it.

He eventually ran away from home, vowing that he would not return until he was a pilot. After leaving Hannibal, Missouri, Twain made his way to Cincinnati and soon thereafter boarded a vessel named the *Paul Jones* bound for New Orleans. While on the ship Twain made a deal with the ship's captain, Mr. Bixby—if the seasoned pilot would teach him to navigate the river the young Twain would pay his mentor five hundred dollars out of his first wages upon graduating.

After many trips up and down the river, Twain realized just how hard it was to navigate it skillfully. He filled his notebook with the names of towns, "points," bars, islands, bends, reaches, and so on, but sadly none of it remained in his head. Each time he thought he knew enough to at least navigate the ship in the daylight, Mr. Bixby would test him and show him that there was still much to learn. If Twain knew where a snag lay hidden in the distance, Bixby would ask him to describe the shape of a distant sandbar from memory or to rattle off the depth of the water in various points along the river.

Frustration eventually set in, and Twain threw up his hands saying, "When I get so I can do that, I'll be able to raise the dead, and then I won't have to pilot a steamboat to make a living. I want to retire from this business. I want a slush-bucket and a brush; I'm only fit for a roustabout. I haven't got brains enough to be a pilot; and if I had I wouldn't have the strength to carry them around, unless I went on crutches" (1990:59).

The stubborn Mr. Bixby would not let his cub pilot give in and assured him one day he would be able to read the river. Sure enough, the eager pilot finally got it, saying:

It turned out to be true. The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book—a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice. And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day (63–64).

In many ways Catholicism is the study of how to navigate the river of life and get the most out of it. We have to fill our notebooks with teachings, principles, experiences, inspirations, and interpretations to see better God’s loving presence in our lives and the world around us. Sometimes it can be overwhelming. When we finally get it, as Twain got the river, the sacred lays itself open to us in ways that are “dead to the uneducated passenger.”

## RELIGION

Religion and spirituality in America are big news these days. While people are much more comfortable saying they are spiritual rather than religious, perhaps because the former is more ambiguous than the latter, there is plenty of room for both.

As a Catholic publisher I have tracked with intense fascination the explosion of interest in all things related to the sacred. A quick survey of the *New York Times* bestseller list at the time of this writing (September 21, 1997) reveals eight “religious” hardcover and paperback nonfiction titles in the top spots: *Conversations with God: Book 1*; *Conversations with God: Book 2*; *The Bible Code, A Simple Path*; *Simple Abundance*; *Kitchen Table Wisdom*; *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*; and *Chicken Soup for the Woman’s Soul*. Past lists have featured *A History of God*; *Care of the Soul*; *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*; *The Celestine Prophecy*; *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*; and *God: A Biography* as dominant national bestsellers. I had the extraordinary privilege of acquiring and editing Joseph Cardinal Bernardin’s *The Gift of Peace*, which remained on the *Times* bestseller list for over four months in 1997.

*Publishers Weekly*, the bible for anyone in the book industry, calls religion the “publishing success story” of the ’90s. The American Booksellers Association said sales for religious books increased 92.2 percent between 1991 and 1994. In 1995 Barnes & Noble increased its stock of religion titles by 35 percent. Last year 37 percent of all commercial audiotapes produced dealt with religion or spiritual issues.

But it does not take a publisher to see that people are hungry for the sacred, religion, and spirituality. Just turn on the television or look at the cover of the news magazines in the check-out line at the supermarket. Cover stories from the small collection of *Time* magazines I have saved over the past two years include (in order of appearance) “Is

the Bible Fact or Fiction?" "Faith and Healing," "Can We Still Believe in Miracles?" "The Right Hand of God," "The Search for Jesus," "And God Said . . . The Debate Over the Meaning of Genesis," "Jesus On-line," and "Does Heaven Exist?" *Newsweek* magazine has also run its fair share of religious cover stories including more recently "The Mystery of Prayer" and "The Meaning of Mary."

#### *God Goes Prime Time*

In the September 22, 1997, issue of *Time* magazine, reporter Joel Stein says, "This season the networks are paving a multilane highway to heaven with an unprecedented eight shows with religious and spiritual themes" (95). Four of these shows are returning after successful debut's last year: *Touched By an Angel*; *7th Heaven*; *Soul Man*; and *Promised Land*. Joining them are *Good News*; *Teen Angel*; *The Visitor*; and the hyped and most controversial of the newcomers, *Nothing Sacred*.

What gives? Stein argues, "As the millennium approaches and baby boomers begin to confront their own mortality, people have begun to seek out the comfort of religion in all aspects of their lives—even on TV" (96). So where does Gen X fit into all this?

#### *Talkin' 'Bout My Generation . . . X*

Getting a handle on Generation X is no easy task. Not even for one smack dab in the middle of it. When Douglas Coupland coined the term *Generation X* in his 1991 novel by the same name, he made famous the idea that those of us born between 1964 and 1977 are slackers, cynics, and drifters.

As the children of the Baby Boomers, we became the Baby Busters. And as bearers of the torch for the new generation (or as Pepsi calls us, generation neXt), we changed the rules and did things our way. That "way" has gotten a bad rap, which, deserved or not, begs the question, Where do Xers come from?

Understanding our parents' generation is essential to understanding our own. In her book *Re-Discovering the Sacred: Spirituality in America*, Phyllis Tickle, religion editor at *Publisher's Weekly*, provides this assessment:

Just as Hiroshima's crucial influence on our times is obvious to everyone who cares to look, so too is Vietnam's. . . . The one clear lesson that we as a citizenry got out of Vietnam was pervasive as well as central: Never trust authority—not its morals or its integrity or (God help us) its edicts, directions, and explanations. . . . No authority, ever. Period. After Nam, Nixon, and that string of assassinations at home and abroad, the individual's perception of right and wrong, do and don't do, believe and don't believe became the

litmus test for commitment and . . . also for moral responsibility and judgment. (1995:22–23)

And the Boomers' relationship to God, religion, and spirituality? Tickle continues:

. . . because they as baby boomers were/are many more in number, greater in influence, and more enfranchised financially than any other segment of late-twentieth-century America, their distrust of external authority has made all the difference in contemporary America's attitudes toward the sacred and all things depending from it—morality, spirituality, faith, theology, and most assuredly, religion itself (23).

As the descendants of the Boomers, we Busters derive our attitudes from our forebears and face our own challenges in light of what we have learned. What has been the Xers' experience?

My generation has grown up with, among other things, the recession of the early 1980s, the 1987 stock market crash after a growth period, the recession of 1990–91, an unprecedented divorce rate, the advent of latchkey kids, homelessness, a bankrupt social security system, holes in the ozone layer, AIDS, crack, MTV, the Internet, downsizing and layoffs, cutbacks in federal funding for students, and the lingering threat of a multi-trillion-dollar federal deficit.

In the face of all this, we became jaded. We have experienced many changes in social, moral, religious, and cultural standards unlike the stability which marked the childhood of Baby Boomers. It is difficult to put down deep roots when everything is changing so rapidly (Tomaszek, December 1995–January 1996:8).

Yet in the six years since Coupland named us, something dramatic has happened to members of my generation. "Slapped with the label Generation X, they've turned the tag into a badge of honor. They are X-citing, X-igent, X-pansive. They're the next big thing," argues Margot Hornblower in her *Time* cover story "Great Xpectations" (1997:58).

The forty-five million Xers alive today are comprised of a higher percentage of college graduates than any previous generation and represent \$125 billion in annual purchasing power per year. Rather than being lazy and listless, we are ambitious and competitive. While the nearly seventy-eight million Boomers still outnumber us, manufacturers, politicians, churches, military recruiting offices, moviemakers, magazines, and so on have their sights set on the elusive and almost uncategorizable Xers.

So what does Gen X make of religion and spirituality? One of the Xers interviewed for the *Time* article says, "The soul of Gen X is amorphous, intangible, elusive. That's why I like the term X: fill in the blanks."

Fill in the blanks indeed. While there is a certain appeal to the limitless possibilities X can represent, there is also a danger, especially when it comes to the soul, that people of my generation will avoid naming the unknown variable or will name it something that is less than life-giving and healthy.

Where does God fit into the equation? "He doesn't," Friedrich Nietzsche would say, "God is dead as a matter of cultural fact and therefore all things are possible." I believe the exact opposite, God lives and therefore all things are possible. I think a good percentage of Xers would agree with me. The great question remains: How do we reach the soul of Gen X?

#### *Generation(s) of Seekers*

In 1993 Wade Clark Roof, a professor of religion and society at the University of California at Santa Barbara, published a seminal work entitled *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. Roof documents the rise of spirituality and religion in contemporary America among those adults most shaped by the experience. Because of his research Boomers have become known as the Seeker Generation.

We have already discussed some of the reasons Boomers are seeking, primary among them being that they are looking to plug themselves into life-giving systems and institutions such as the Church and religious traditions, watered down as they may be, after a long hiatus from allowing any external authority into their lives.

But I contest that Boomers are not the only generation of seekers. Generation X is also hungry for meaning and is certainly not oblivious to the value of the spiritual quest. To miss this point is to miss reaching a generation ready to talk.

Admittedly, things are different for Xers than they were for Boomers. Researcher George Barna, author of *Baby Busters: The Disillusioned Generation*, has said, "In terms of evangelicalism, we have a generation coming up that doesn't speak the same language, doesn't go to the same places, doesn't have the same needs, and isn't looking to Christianity to answer their spiritual concerns. We either change or we lose them" (Tapia, 1994).

In *Modern Liturgy* magazine, Thomas Tomaszek, a campus minister at Alverno College in Milwaukee, offers some excellent ideas on how to reach Generation X. He says that liturgies need to (1) celebrate diversity and take into account that Xers are more diverse ethnically, culturally, and economically than any generation that has preceded it; (2) appeal visually and musically to a generation that grew up in the age of multimedia; (3) appeal to Xers' desire for community and family in an age when the breakdown of the family and community runs rampant; and

(4) provide homilies that address the real-life issues we face today (December 1995–January 1996:7–9).

#### ACTION

Members of Generation X, or any generation for that matter, rightly desire ministers, parish leaders, and the like to reach out to them, but they also need to take an active role in fulfilling the goals of their seeking and searching. Being attracted to religious tradition, ritual, and spiritual heritage because these things bring us closer to God, others, and ultimately ourselves is a good start. But it is not enough. Belief and religion require action.

#### *So I Believe in God, Now What?*

As I reflect on my belief in God and participation in the Catholic Church, I cannot help but to see the hand of God at work in my life. I have worked hard, yes. But I have also been blessed with many opportunities and experiences that go beyond luck into the realm of providence. The key to it all has been keeping an open mind, embracing the journey of life, and being grateful for the gifts I have been given.

When I graduated from Notre Dame, I found myself constantly discouraged by the dreadful lack of good preaching and effective liturgy outside of campus. I know that I was spoiled by the intimate dorm Masses, strong sense of community, and wonderful care the priests took in addressing us students, but nonetheless I was astounded that I could not find something akin in my community at large. So I stopped going to Mass.

After nine months of working in a bookstore and as an editor for my family's publishing company, I began applying for jobs in Catholic publishing. Though I was still figuring out my relationship to the Church, my background in English and philosophy as well as my interest in theology seemed like a good fit for Catholic publishing houses.

I landed a job at Loyola Press and moved to Chicago. Immediately I felt the Catholic presence in the life of the city. From time to time I would venture out to parishes in Chicago, but none ever really held my interest. My real Catholic education was taking place through my work as an editor.

Finally two years ago I met Fr. John Cusick, another of the essayists in this issue and a dear friend of mine, and through him found my way to Old Saint Patrick's where he preaches. St. Pat's is located just west of the Loop in downtown Chicago. It is not in a neighborhood and requires some effort to get there. Yet, people from all over the city and suburbs flock to the church in droves, including many members of Generation X. The preaching is good, the music is good, the community is good. So I go to Mass regularly these days.

Through St. Pat's, its pastor Fr. Jack Wall, along with Father Cusick and Kate DeVries, who direct the Young Adult Ministry office of the Archdiocese of Chicago, I have also become involved in the life of the parish and the archdiocese. I have been a speaker at various programs, including the annual month-long Theology-on-Tap series featuring forty speakers and serving forty-three parishes throughout the Chicago and Joliet dioceses. I have also read at Mass and offered ideas on ways to serve the community of people who attend St. Pat's. This year I became a board member of the Young Leaders of Old St. Pat's, an organization dedicated to fostering social and professional relationships, providing spiritual nourishment, heightening the awareness of the pertinent issues of our community, and cultivating the leadership skills of its members.

These past two years have been wonderful. My weekly participation in Mass and the parish programs have given me a chance to meet many terrific people of all ages who, like me, are working to put their belief into action. From my experience I can say that Generation X is well represented in this archdiocese and that far from being slackers and aimless whiners, we are dedicated and committed to putting our belief into action.

When faced recently with a decision whether or not to stay in Catholic publishing, I reaffirmed my commitment to acquiring and developing books that make a positive difference in people's lives and accepted a job with Sheed & Ward, a division of the National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company, Inc. As one who is in the midst of questioning and exploring my faith, I hope to bring a much-needed perspective to the world of Catholic publishing.

Now what? As I understand it, the ultimate goal of Catholicism is to find such things as meaning, peace, happiness, freedom, and loving relationships on this part of the journey as well as at the end. In the course of living my belief, I wait in joyful hope for all that is to come.

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