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Morality and the Next Generation: Amoral, Immoral, or Morally Different?

Recently I attended a book discussion in conjunction with the Catholic Theological Society of America's annual convention. Those on the dais were prominent scholars, *all* in their forties or fifties, holding forth on ethical issues related to "our generation" vis-à-vis church hierarchy and authority. The audience too was heavily children of the 1950s and '60s, or even earlier. I find this to be an accurate demographic description of many Catholic theological, ecclesial, and religious education gatherings in these waning years of the last decade of the twentieth century (Cateura, 1989; Kennedy, 1988; Roof, 1993).

One of the speakers, an ethicist, scholar, and mother of five, called our attention to the graying and balding nature of the assembly and to the valid, but time-contexted content of the discussion. The distinctiveness of Christian ethics; the role of church authority in the quest for truth; the proportionalist debate over moral norms; feminist consciousness and the ordination of women—all these are critical questions for baby-boomer Catholics in dialogue, often debate, with an older generation or at least an older mindset within the Church and its hierarchy. Not to diminish the importance of these ongoing, mutually respectful struggles, the speaker suggested that her children, the next generation, "could care less" about many of these issues. For the most part, they are not where we are concerning the Church, morality, or the future.

The task for this generation of parents, clergy, pastoral ministers, theologians, educators, and catechists would seem to be more about how to pass on the Catholic-Christian faith and "way of life" (i.e., morality) to the next generation than about resolving our own rightful, long-standing generational issues of freedom, authority, dilemma ethics, and gender equality. While still involved in constructive criticism and ongoing ecclesial reformation, how do "we" inspire, mentor, and influence the moral and faith life of "them," the next generation? Who is this "them"? Do they need our help? Has the evolution and/or revolution in Catholic moral theology of the post-Vatican II era failed? Or, is it yet to be tried and fully implemented?

With some degree of fear and trepidation, I take up the mantle of the prophet and moral pundit for this brief overview of the next generation and its moral terrain. Others have worn this mantle before with

similar qualms about their ability to prognosticate the ethical shape of the upcoming new millennium (P. McCormick, 1993; R. McCormick, 1993, 94). First, we will take a look at young adults today, that generation known variously as “Generation X” or “Thirteeners,” those in their twenties to forties, born after the post-War baby-boom of the Truman/Eisenhower years (Coupland, 1991; Howe/Strauss, 1992). Are they truly one generation? Are “twenty-somethings” of the Bush/Clinton decade really kindred spirits to those-over-thirty of the Reagan era? Stereotypes can be dangerous, but does this “generation” have its own ethos and earmarks? Second, we will examine briefly the post-Vatican II trends and movements within Catholic moral theology to see where this discipline, the study of morality, has come and is going. Finally, we will attempt to marry or merge the two. How does contemporary scholarly and pastorally-sensitive moral reflection intersect or conflict with, influence or miss-the-mark of so-called “Generation X”? There seems to be more hope for convergence and conversion than fundamentalistic doom-sayers may fear or predict.

YOUNG ADULTS IN THE 1990s: WHO ARE THEY?

For those who went through the Great Depression of the 1930s, the value of a dollar, the security of a job, and the support of one’s family and community are treasured lessons learned in the “school of hard knocks.” For veterans of World War II or Korea and those civilians who remember rationing and war bond rallies, values like patriotism, self-sacrifice, and freedom are central and ring true. For children of post-War Eisenhower prosperity, the Cold War, and the 1960s Age of Aquarius, a tenuous combination of idealism, materialism, and cynical realism seems to have evolved. But what about the generation born in the 1960s and ’70s, children of us baby-boomers? What do young adults today hold dear? How has this generation been influenced by growing up during the presidencies of Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton, as well as the pontificate of John Paul II?

In official church and religious education circles the term “young adults” is used to designate those in their twenties and thirties. Unfortunately, the same term is more often used in common parlance for adolescents and teen-agers, in an attempt to elevate their status and to differentiate them from prepubescent children. In some sense, there seem to be some common sociological threads running through all three of these decades of young adults—adolescents, twenty-somethings, and those in their thirties. They are all children of the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-Vatican II era. At the same time it would be unfair to lump together the thirty-somethings approaching middle age (whose childhood is more heavily shaded by the consumerist ’80s of Ronald Reagan) with those in their twenties (whose adolescence was

colored more by the end of the Cold War and the mainstreaming of personal computers) with today's teens (who are now bursting into puberty as well as into cyberspace and onto the information super-highway). Between and among the decades there are admittedly shades of difference and distinction.

Just as there is no commonly accepted name designation for this generation, so too the pundits and scholars differ widely in their evaluation of the earmarks or traits which best summarize or synthesize them as a subset of the culture. One description, focused on the lower end of this three-decade spectrum, suggests:

As they shield their eyes with Ray-Ban Wayfarer sunglasses, and their ears with Model TCD-D3 Sony Walkmen, today's teens and twenty-somethings present to Boomer eyes a splintered image of brassy looks and smooth manner, of kids growing up too tough to be cute, of kids more comfortable shopping or playing than working or studying. Ads target them as beasts of pleasure and pain who have trouble understanding words longer than one syllable, sentences longer than three words. . . . Newsclips document a young-adult wasteland of academic nonperformance, political apathy, suicide pacts, date-rape trials, wilding, and hate crimes (Howe/Strauss, 1992:74).

Surely there is "some" truth in this unflattering overview. Slackers, whiners, shoppers, "mallers," children-of-divorce, and latchkey kids are some of the elements associated with young adults reared in the affluent late-1970s, '80s, and '90s. Raised on fast food and in the ambiance of the burgeoning computer age, they are used to immediate response, glitz, speed, conspicuous consumption, ready access, and fairly instant gratification. Young people today are staying in school longer, maturing slower, often living at home indefinitely, while simultaneously expecting to enter the job market immediately after graduation fairly high on the ladder of corporate pay and prestige. Frequently they live in socio-economic ghettos, yuppie condos or gentrified neighborhoods, associating almost exclusively with "their own kind," despite the increased multicultural demographics and potential of the '90s global village (Giles, 1994).

Some of this negative critique bespeaks the inevitable hand-wringing analysis of one generation about the shortcomings of the next. Despite our pledges not to adopt parental phrases like "in our day we didn't ____" or "what's this world coming to?" older critics tend to harp on the shortcomings or perceived lacunae of those who come after them. Sociologically every generation does a certain amount of moaning about the music, mores, and manners (or lack thereof) of the younger generation.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

However, I propose five threads or traits that I believe say something about what many young adults share in common, some broad brushstrokes about those who will be in their mid-life prime as we enter the new millennium. I offer these without ascribing praise or blame. They reflect core aspects of the peer-cultural terrain in which members of "Generation X" will have to do their own moral reflection and ethical decision-making. Young adults today tend to be: (1) bright, though not necessarily wise; (2) instinctively respectful of authority figures, but not of their advice; (3) focused on short-term goals and immediate satisfaction; (4) morally inconsistent; and (5) spiritually hungry, altruistic, and seeking to "belong," though somewhat naively so.

1. *Educated but Wise?*

Young adults today tend to be bright and fairly broadly educated. Despite the peaks and valleys of national test results, those educated in the last three decades have an impressive, multifaceted range of knowledge. In addition to the three Rs, this generation has had far greater exposure to science, math, computer technology, the humanities, languages, geography and global issues than previous generations. However, the downside of this broadly-based education seems to be a certain shallowness of insight. Some suggest that while young people today have more knowledge, more data, more factual information, they may be less prepared to deal with it in terms of human relationships, depth or perceptive insights, and genuine philosophical wisdom.

"Delayed adolescence" seems to be related to this phenomenon. While the onset of puberty and the imparting of information happens earlier these days, it is not clear that young people in recent decades have been as able to accept the challenge of maturity and responsibility at the same accelerated rate (Coupland, 1991; Adler, 1994). Despite the breadth of their education, the depth of their insight and experience seems disproportionately superficial at times. Broader is not deeper. While young adults in every age tend to be a bit impetuous and unnuanced in their reflections on life, this generation seems even less prepared to accept and/or cope with life's disappointments and trials. *Formation* seems not to have kept pace with *information*.

2. *Attitude Toward Authority*

Unlike children of the 1960s, who came to somewhat cynical maturity under the clouds of assassinations, Watergate, and Vietnam, young adults in the 1990s seem far less suspicious of authority, far more accepting of the good will and sincerity of those in charge. This seems true of their view of political figures like Bill Clinton or George Bush, of

entrepreneurs like Bill Gates and Donald Trump as well as about popular spiritual icons as diverse as Mother Teresa, Mother Angelica, Billy Graham, and the Dali Lama. The anti-authority penchant of the 1960s has given way to an almost naive acceptance or appreciation of authority. Perhaps this has been spawned in part by the security of growing up during the long and largely stable 1980s, the decade of paternal figures Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II.

At the same time that young adults seem to accept and even appreciate the integrity and sincerity of world leaders, sports and entertainment figures, and other successful persons as potential “heroes,” the next generation seems less prone to listen closely to them, to engage their ideas, or to adopt and endorse their values. For example, despite the fact that nearly a million young people flocked to Paris for World Youth Day in August 1997, and despite their enthusiastic welcome for Pope John Paul II, akin to the adulation accorded a rock star or other pop culture idol, they seem less prone to accept his teachings and admonitions. The sexual mores of these same young people, their consumerist lifestyles, and minimal sense of social justice seem to be little influenced by the Pope’s impassioned pleas for abstinence and marital fidelity, greater simplicity of lifestyle, and heightened global and social concern. In short, while many young adults today admire and respect powerful and influential community leaders, at the same time they tend not to heed or inculcate the wisdom and advice of those same revered icons (Bellah et al., 1991; Carter, 1993; Hughes, 1995).

3. Short-Term Focus

Many young adults, in their twenties and thirties, seem overly focused on finding personal fulfillment in a rather short-term sense, focusing on immediate pleasures and “happiness” of a rather emotional and shallow variety. Their baby-boomer parents, who had been coddled and somewhat spoiled by their own parents of the Depression and World War II generations, have definitely tried to give this generation any and all advantages—materially, educationally, and socially. In a sense a silver-spooned generation has given birth to a platinum-spooned next generation, steeped in materialism, instant gratification, and a yearning for a kind of smiley-face happiness, sadly simplistic and inevitably unrealistic (Giles, 1994; Hughes, 1995).

Another way of saying this might be that young adults today generally do not deal well with “no,” with putting off present satisfaction for a greater yield in the long run, with delayed reward or even self-sacrifice minus personal gratification. This generation seems somewhat short on Audie Murphy-esque heroes who would fall on a grenade to save their comrades. Personal integrity—long-term fidelity to oneself and to others—seems in somewhat short supply. While ultimately

it may be the fault or responsibility of well-meaning parents and grandparents who spoiled them, the next generation seems not to be terribly fire-tried, battle-tested, or ready for “the long haul” (Bellah et al., 1985, 1991; Sparks 1996).

4. Moral Inconsistency

This earmark requires some *sitz im leben* or situating the question. There was a time in the pre-hippie, pre-Woodstock, pre-Kennedy era when young adults knew that sexual promiscuity and other libertine practices were wrong, wrong for others, and themselves. That does not mean that young people did not do them from time to time. Still, if it was wrong for others, it was wrong for me too. Guilt feelings, remorse, and frequent access to sacramental confession were often the remedies sought following inordinate passion, personal indiscretions, or dishonest deeds. In short, the World War II and Eisenhower generations tended to be conservatively morally consistent.

In the same way, with the dawn of the Age of Aquarius, the influence of the Haight-Ashbury subculture, and the British pop music invasion, a certain licentious “do your own thing” freedom swept through the young adults of the 1960s and ’70s. “You do your thing and I’ll do mine” led to a certain well-meaning but wishy-washy situation ethics, in which meaning well and personal sincerity seemed to be the primary moral benchmarks. Still, in such a young adult subculture there was a certain liberal moral consistency. License for oneself was matched by license for others—“I won’t tread on you and you don’t tread on me.”

What seems at odds today is that many young adults have combined the worst of both eras in a contradictory hybrid—license for me, and harsh judgment about others, particularly those “different” from me and my kind of folks. Thus, fairly widespread nonmarital sex, acceptance of contraception, pervasive materialism, heavy alcohol use, and some flirtation with recreational drugs all seem, in some circles, to be endorsed as morally neutral or even justified for “us,” the middle class or gentrified younger generation. At the same time, within this same group many are quick to judge rather harshly gay and lesbian persons and their lifestyle choices, the underprivileged and those on welfare, immigrants, and others whose sexual or socio-economic status seems threatening, traditionally immoral, or alien to one’s own clique and experience.

Moral consistency or congruency seems lacking for many young adults. Skinheads, white supremacists, and similar “radical” groups bespeak this even more vividly. Liberty for us, judgment and condemnation for them; what is good for the goose is *not* good for the gander. This seems especially operative along gender, sexual orientation, racial, ethnic, and socio-economic lines.

5. *Spiritual Hunger*

A genuine sign of hope is that young adults today seem ripe, primed for personal inspiration, open to genuine spiritual experience as distinct from repetitious religious exercises. There seems to be a genuine spiritual hunger across the culture that is particularly focused on young adults and their boomer-generation parents. The flourishing of new age spirituality; the science fiction craze; renewed interest in angels, miracles, ethereal phenomena, and the occult; the popularity of spiritual books by authors like M. Scott Peck, Thomas Moore, the Pope, and Kathleen Norris; the influx of converts to the Catholic Church, fundamentalist churches, cults, and so-called mega-churches—all bespeak a middle-aged *and younger* culture alive with spiritual hunger (Downey, 1997; Carter, 1993; Kantrowitz, 1994; Ostling, 1993; Roof, 1993; Ludwig, 1996; Coupland, 1994).

At the same time, once on fire with the Spirit, these seekers seem genuinely altruistic, open to a broadened worldview and a greater social justice consciousness. Once made conscious of the lived experiences and injustices endured by others, boomers and their young adult offspring seem ready and willing to act decisively—personally, politically, and socially (Bellah et al., 1985, 1991). Often their quick initial judgments about others, their seemingly closed minds and closed hearts, are more a matter of innocence or ignorance than a considered judgment or hardened conviction (Sparks, 1996).

In the same breath, this *conscientization* process seems for many to be a communal experience, encountered in a retreat weekend of some sort, a prayer group or small faith community, some profound experience of “belonging.” Once touched and empowered, community members, with a heightened sense of spiritual strength and social altruism, are truly a potent force for good (Downey, 1997; Giles, 1994; Kantrowitz, 1994; Poorman, 1993). Still, such first fervor runs the risk of quickly being extinguished because of the third trait noted above, short-term goals and the desire for immediate success. Thus, the spiritual hunger that is afoot runs the risk of being a bit naïve, superficial, and somewhat short-lived.

MORAL THEOLOGY COMES OF AGE

For a brief span let us lay aside the question of the next generation and take a look at where we have come and where we are in terms of contemporary Catholic moral theology. Has the scholarly reflection of the Vatican II era paved the way for any kind of meaningful dialogue or rapprochement with Generation X?

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the bishops of the world prophetically called for a renewal of Christian moral consciousness and scholarship:

Special care should be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific presentation should draw more fully on the teaching of holy Scripture and should throw light on the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world (*Optatam totius*, 1965: #16).

Fortunately, this renewal of Catholic moral theology and wider Christian morality was already underway. It had begun in the theology schools of Europe in the latter part of the nineteenth century (most notably Tübingen), but came to fuller expression in the decades surrounding the Second Vatican Council.

It is not altogether a caricature to say that moral theology, following the Council of Trent in the 1500s, gradually was reduced from its breadth and depth in the era of Aquinas to a mere skeleton of its former self, following the neo-scholastic attempt at recovery and “simplification” of the Thomistic synthesis. Add to this the fact that moral theology as a discipline became primarily a seminary tract for priestly confessors, and it is not surprising that most pre-Vatican II moral discussions focused on specific moral norms, act choices, primarily negative choices, and the gravity of potential sins committed (Häring, 1978; Mahoney, 1987).

What seemed to be lacking in much of Catholic moral theology prior to the Council—due to a lengthy period of Neo-Scholastic emphasis on a somewhat static view of natural law and act-oriented norms—was a specifically or distinctive Christian flavor. It was as if Jesus Christ were more a moral exemplar and philosopher than the incarnate Son of God and Redeemer. Nature and reason reigned, while grace and God’s redemptive action seemed secondary, even superfluous. It was the task of moral theologians of the 1950s and thereafter to regain a better balance, a deeper sense of what might be explicitly “Christian” about morality, while not losing the broader global and inter-religious ethical dialogue, which the natural law tradition affords (Curran, 1987, 1992; R. McCormick, 1989, 1993, 94).

The Time of Renewal

Among Catholic scholars of this period primacy of place arguably goes to Redemptorist Bernard Häring, whose ground-breaking three-volume work, *The Law of Christ*, incorporates a broader, deeper, and more distinctively Christian ethical vision (Häring, 1961, 1963, 1966). Historical documents acknowledge the profound influence Father Häring (and fellow Redemptorist Domenico Capone) had on the conciliar text *Gaudium et spes*, the Church in the Modern World document (McDonough, 1997). Häring helped to broaden Catholic moral theology from an almost exclusive focus on natural law and the morality of

specific acts, to a fuller examination of what it means to live *The Law of Christ* or, as he later rephrased it, to live *Free & Faithful in Christ* (Häring, 1978). So too, Jesuit Fr. Josef Fuchs, a peer scholar and contemporary of Father Häring, has made significant contributions to this ongoing renewal of Catholic moral theology (Fuchs, 1965, 1987). Some of the earmarks of such a renewed Catholic-Christian ethic include: (1) greater attention to the Christian story or stance; (2) a more personalist or holistic notion of what it means to be human and humane; (3) a deeper sense of the relational nature of human life; and (4) a more historically conscious, ongoing sense of moral discovery, both in theory and pastoral practice (Connors/P. McCormick, 1998; Curran, 1987, 1992; Gula, 1997; John Paul II, 1993; R. McCormick, 1989, 1993, 94; P. McCormick, 1993; Poorman, 1993; Sparks, 1996).

In a recent textual discussion of the Redemptorists' contribution to Vatican II, William McDonough makes a convincing case for the fact that this task of fashioning a renewed moral method, that is both true to the Christian tradition as well as pastorally sensitive to nuances of each case and context, is not a *fait accompli*. He argues that while Häring and the Council Fathers ushered in the concept of a creative tension or juxtaposition between objective moral values and situational pastoral application, there is much work to be done to make this a truly synthetic method of moral discernment. The relationship is still a bit vague as to how to reconcile three core factors: (a) magisterially-defined moral insights, (b) the further input of human experience (especially of those most involved in the moral situation under discussion), (c) all within the context of the wider *communio sanctorum*, the Church as a faithful, virtuous, historical (i.e., ongoing and changing) community (McDonough, 1997).

A Counter-Reform?

Some Catholic conservatives fear that this more broadly-conceived moral theology, although rooted in a more explicitly Christian and faith-filled perspective, is also less precise, less black and white, less able to be overseen and controlled by ecclesial authority. Moral absolutes, while still viable, are less clear and the list of clear-cut "thou shalt nots" seems shorter. Some would even suggest that the socio-cultural tilt to the left of the post-World War II decades not only parallels this broadening of the moral vision, but may be directly the result of it, all under what critics see as a mistaken notion of greater "pastoral care."

For those who adopt such a view, the rapprochement between moral theology and the next generation is simple—"batten down the hatches!" Return to a more deductive and exceptionless set of moral norms and then impose them, by exhortation if possible, by mandate if necessary.

Some suggest that the time is right for a pendulum swing back to a more God-fearing, absolutist, less situational approach to the moral enterprise. They argue that some or all of the five traits noted in section one above, regarding the character of young adults today, may be attributable to this broader moral morass ushered in by Häring, Fuchs, Vatican II, et al. Turn back the ecclesial and theological clock, they say, and we will regain a greater sense of moral unity and purpose.

A TENTATIVE SUGGESTION FOR MORAL RAPPROCHEMENT

I would like to suggest that it is simplistic and futile to see the next generation too one-sidedly as immoral, lost, rudderless, and in need of this firmer authoritarian hand. I think such efforts will either fail or, if successful, will be like the Gospel story of the one-and-seven demons, “the last state . . . is worse than the first” (Luke 11:24-26). Repression is not identical with conversion, though it may appear so in terms of external behavior alone.

As I hinted at the beginning of this essay, it may be that the time is ripe for a genuine dialogue between this revitalized Catholic moral theology and the culture for which and out of which it is being fashioned. The very lacunae of the former theology—lack of specific Christian faith and depth, too narrow a concept of the human, too individualistic, and a tendency toward an ahistorical absolutism—these parallel to a large extent either the flaws or the *raison d’être* for the shortcomings of the next generation of young adults, as well as what is missing in and for many of their baby-boomer parents. Much of the moral relativism, inconsistency, and short-sightedness outlined in section one may be a sign of a generation, or two, reacting (overreacting?) to moral laws which seemed too deductive, too neatly packaged, too ethereal, and somehow “out of touch with” common human experience, albeit flawed, weak, and imperfect.

In the face of a moral framework that seemed all too act-focused, airtight and a bit heartless, baby-boomers, their children, and now grandchildren may tend to jettison the baby of “objective” morality with the bathwater of its pre-Vatican II Neo-Scholastic packaging. And yet, all is not lost. I believe there is room for some rejoicing and a measure of hope. If the next generation is indeed bright, instinctively respectful of mentors, and spiritually hungry, then they are ripe for conversion, the kind of holistic faith-filled conversion that Häring, Fuchs, and Vatican II tried to usher in.

The Task Ahead

Can we, the older half of the Church, offer them a community experience, a liturgical experience, a catechetical experience, and a lived faith experience that is holistic and real? This starts with a faith and a

moral code that is at once more personal and humane as well as interpersonal and socially responsible. Thus, the Catholic social ethics tradition—with its emphasis on inherent and abiding human dignity, the common good, stewardship, and a preferential option for the poor—seems right on target (Curran, 1987, 1992; Connors/P. McCormick, 1998; Sparks, 1996). Our Catholic social justice theory, even if not always our actual practice, offers a vision that is morally consistent, neither libertine nor Gestapo-like. The question remains, in this present generation do we strive to practice what we preach? Or, at least, do we strive as individuals and together to better practice what we preach? Does our sacramental worship, our moral heritage, and a greater sense of living “in the meantime” speak to and invite the next generation? Hospitality is key; so, too, inspiration and consistency.

But even more than this, the next generation deserves to hear the Christian story told anew. It is as old as the Chosen People fleeing into the desert following the first Passover. It is as new as Nelson Mandela’s victory in South Africa, Mother Teresa’s life and death among the poor of Calcutta, or the last time any of us personally experienced light amidst the darkness in our daily lives. For those of us who call ourselves “Christian,” this core story is found distinctively, uniquely in the story of Jesus Christ, particularly the story of Good Friday to Easter Sunday.

In our efforts, following the Second Vatican Council, to emphasize God’s abiding love and goodness, we may have inadvertently collapsed the harsher death/redemption dimension of the Christian Gospel into the more jovial, but incomplete resurrection piece. In the process, God may have been reduced to a divine Pillsbury Doughboy (puffy and soft) and the Paschal Mystery may have been reduced to the American myth. Indeed, both the stories of Holy Week and of the rags-to-riches American dream (i.e., Horatio Alger stories) start out the same. We are each and all blessed with many gifts, talents, and blessings, and are called to make the most of them. The American myth goes on to promise that if you work hard, if you give your all to your dream, you will achieve that dream, with the counterpromise that if you fail, it must be your own fault. This myth is the basis of much of the lure of western capitalism and 1980s Reaganomics, and of the subsequent disillusionment following the economic recession of the late 1980s and early ‘90s.

The reality is that being gifted plus hard work is only part of the story. Sometimes the dutiful worker loses, through no fault of his/her own. Others may be more competent, or more corrupt and conniving, or perhaps it is just the “luck of the draw.” Sometimes we happen to be “the wrong person, in the wrong place, at the wrong time,” by chance or ill-fate, no one’s fault or responsibility.

In the end the Christian story advocates and rewards genuine fidelity—personal integrity and long-term commitment—not earthly success. Despite Jesus' doubts and fears in the Garden and again on the Cross, ultimately he finds the graced faith to say, ". . . not my will, but yours be done" and "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 22:42; 23:46). It is precisely in living the Christian way, the moral life outlined in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, that we attain moral integrity and eternal life as well. If we succeed in an earthly sense, we should thank God for our gifts and rejoice in our valiant efforts to use them wisely. However, if we fail on this side of the rainbow (through no fault of our own) there is still room for hope and abiding faith. As the prayer of St. Francis states so succinctly, ". . . for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying, that we are born to eternal life."

Conclusion

To a next generation that is hungering for real spiritual food, that is prone to altruism provided they can be shown the way, and who are on a quest for belonging, for heroes and communities in which they can believe, we Catholic Christians have a golden opportunity. First, our message of fulfillment through commitment rings true to those who are finding short-term goals too shallow and, in the long run, unsatisfying. Second, our efforts to deepen our sense of the human, our Vatican II concept of the "human person integrally and adequately considered," intrigues a generation turned off by too facile, too deductive an approach to morality and human well-being. Third, our very Catholicity—universality and communal sense of mission and salvation—appeals to young adults seeking a spiritual home, a place where they can sink roots and belong. Fourth, in our newly rediscovered sense of historicity in which this Christian story has begun but is still in process, we invite the next generation to join us in the quest.

We invite them to bring along their moral questions and doubts. We invite them to engage us in the ongoing dialogue, the search for God's reign in this distinct time and place. Their needs and honest search and our evolving Christian moral understanding are meant for each other. Providence draws us together and calls us forward into the new millennium (O'Keefe 1995; Billy/Orsuto, 1996; Connors/P. McCormick, 1998; Gula, 1997; Sparks, 1996). It is a bit scary, but also alluring. As in every age, God has set before us "life and death, blessings and curses." Seniors, mid-lifers, boomers, and Generation Xers together are called to "choose life" so that we and our descendants may live—loving God, neighbor and self "free and faithful in Christ" (Deut 30:19; Häring, 1978). And that is the sum and substance of Catholic-Christian morality, for the next generation, for every generation.

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