Having a faith conversation with old and new friends is as easy as setting the table.
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The FAITH FEEDS program is designed for individuals who are hungry for opportunities to talk about their faith with others who share it. Participants gather over coffee or a potluck lunch or dinner, and a host facilitates conversation using the C21 Center’s biannual magazine, C21 Resources.

The FAITH FEEDS GUIDE offers easy, step-by-step instructions for planning, as well as materials to guide the conversation. It’s as simple as deciding to host the gathering wherever your community is found and spreading the word.
“...[E]very one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need.”
—Pope Francis

Here are two articles to guide your FAITH FEEDS conversation. We suggest that you select one or two articles that will work best for your group. In addition to the original article, you will find a relevant quotation, summary, and suggested questions for discussion. We offer these as tools for your use, but feel free to go where the Holy Spirit leads. The articles are taken from the Summer 2019 Issue of C21 Resources.

This guide’s theme is: Revitalizing Our Church
Last June, I found myself sitting next to Cardinal Joseph Tobin on a bus in Florida. I had just addressed the general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops about my experience at the pre-synod meeting in Rome in March of 2018, and we were all headed to Mass at a local parish. Over the course of the half-hour bus ride, Cardinal Tobin and I talked about a lot of things: a new company that made Catholic socks, our favorite books, recently watched TV shows and our families. As the oldest of 13 children, Cardinal Tobin had a number of stories about his siblings and their kids—how loud family gatherings were and the nicknames his nieces and nephews had given him over the years.

As we talked, he said, “You know, Katie, the thing my mother is most proud of when it comes to us kids—most of us have professional degrees, we’re well educated and successful—but all 13 of us are still Catholic. She is proudest of that.”

Knowing the statistics of disaffiliation, the decline in church attendance over the years, the emptying of the pews in just the past decade alone, I was shocked. “How?” I blurted out. “Forgive my bluntness, Cardinal, but what was the ‘secret sauce’ to keep you all Catholic? What did your parents do?”

Cardinal Tobin took a long pause, then replied: “I think for all of us, the Church has always just been home. And you don’t leave your home.”

That brief conversation on a bus last summer is etched into my mind, especially in light of the scandals that have rocked our Church these past few months. In the moments when I have not wanted to go to Sunday Mass, I hear, “You don’t leave your home.” When I have wanted to skip daily
prayer or avoid having a conversation with a priest or take off the crucifix pendant hanging around my neck, I hear, “You don’t leave your home.”

In the face of great pain and scandals, it is healing and helpful to think of the Church as home.

But perhaps I am lucky to be able to think this way. I do not feel out of place in the Church. Even when I go to a new parish, surrounded by total strangers, with a priest I’ve never seen and songs I have never sung, I feel at home. There is the familiarity of where to find the tabernacle, when to sit, stand and kneel, where to put my hand when I walk through the door, searching for the holy water font, looking for the candles burning in front of a statue of Our Lady.

My deep-seated love for the Church began with what surrounded me in my own home growing up: the art on the walls, the nativity sets displayed at Christmas, the crucifix hanging in our kitchen, right next to the refrigerator, so that every time you went to grab a glass of milk, there was Jesus, staring at you from the cross.

The Church is my home because my home was a domestic church.

My parents are not theologians. My mom is an accountant and my dad a director of bank security. They did not raise us in a mini-seminary, and they could not explain the ins and outs of the sacraments (nor would I expect them to). But they are good, salt-of-the-earth, hard-working, everyday Catholics who brought me and my sister to Mass on Sunday, sent us to youth group events, led us in grace before meals each night and encouraged us to be unafraid to ask questions and talk about our Catholic faith. They attend morning Mass every day, go on retreats and serve as mentors to engaged couples in our parish. They have rosary beads in their pockets, crosses around their necks, holy cards stuck in the dashboard of their cars and Catholic art adorning the walls of their home.

The deep faith of my adulthood was born out of a very rich experience of the simple Catholic living that surrounded me as a child.

Now that I have a daughter, the thought of raising children in the Faith and “building the domestic church” can be intimidating. There is a fear that my husband and I are doing something wrong or that we are not doing enough or that our children will some day become part of the disaffiliated “nones” that swear off the Faith and hate Catholicism because it was forced on them or does not make rational sense anymore.

But the best way to build the domestic church and to quell those fears is not necessarily by doing anything other than simply being faithful Catholics ourselves. Our personal witness to the Catholicism we love can and does deeply enrich the lives of our children. The objects we place in our home that call to mind our faith imprints the images of our Church into their hearts and minds. The simple conversations we have about what we believe will be remembered for years and carried into adulthood.

Pope Francis recently told a group of parents, “The important thing is to transmit the Faith with your life of faith: that they see the love of the spouses, that they see the peace of the house, that they see that Jesus is there.”

The domestic church is not constructed in a day but built up over time, growing with the family through the witness of the parents, the things filling the house and the conversations encouraged and shared. The Faith is not simply learned and memorized. It is transmitted. It is experienced. It is witnessed and then loved and then lived. It is in those homes, where faith is visibly lived and loved, that the Church becomes a home one would never leave.

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Katie Prejean McGrady is an international speaker, educator, and author. She participated in the Vatican’s pre-synod gathering of young people in March 2018 as a delegate of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
“The home is the first school of Christian life and ‘a school for human enrichment.’ Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous — even repeated — forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer and the offering of one’s life”
—Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1657

Summary
In this essay, author Katie Prejean McGrady reflects on how her own upbringing helped her to think of the Catholic Church as “home.” McGrady considers the practices and traditions that her parents passed along to her, which she in turn hopes to pass to her children. She argues that thinking of the Church as one’s home can help believers to recognize Jesus there, even in the midst of human imperfection.

Questions for Conversation
1. Do you share McGrady’s feeling that the Catholic Church is a sort of home, a place of rest or a place in which you have learned what it means to be a human being?
2. Was the home that you were raised in or others homes you entered helpful in building up your faith?
3. How important do you think parents are in helping to pass on the Faith to the next generation? Who else in the family is vital to that enterprise?
I want to share some of the truths about the landscape we find ourselves in. Most of these truths existed before the summer of 2018, but I believe they have important implications and ties to our recent crisis.

**TRUTH #4 – WE’RE BRACING FOR A SEISMIC GENERATIONAL SHIFT**

Beginning in 1990 we see a precipitous drop in the practice of the faith. Marriage is a good leading indicator for baptism, but Catholic marriages are down by 55 percent. But even one in five children who are baptized will not make their First Holy Communion, and two in five baptized Catholics will never receive Confirmation. Eighty-five percent of those confirmed will leave the faith by age 21. Many people believe that the young and disaffiliated will come back when they get married, but with marriage rates down, that return rate is not nearly what it was.

One of the projections that we find the Church least prepared for is the seismic generational shift that will affect our country. Of the 22 Million Catholic Baby Boomers, 60% practice their faith today. Only 30% of Gen X Catholics practice their faith. Because the vast majority of volunteering and giving in the Church is done by those over the age of 55, when Gen X’ers replace Boomers as parish leaders, we are looking at an estimated loss of $5 billion a year for the US Catholic Church if we continue on similar trend lines.

**TRUTH #3 – IT’S HARD TO HAND ON THE FAITH**

The majority of our institutions and ministries are based on assumptions that are simply no longer true – one being that the family is where the faith is passed down. That’s no longer a guarantee. Many parishes have been trying to fill a void that it is impossible for them to fill. What that has given rise to are a set of mismatched and unmet expectations: for example, one hour of parish-based religious education each week under threat of not being able to play CYO basketball cannot replace daily and intentional formation of children by their parents.

Even Catholic schools can’t fill that void, nor were they designed to in their current format. Many parents don’t feel equipped to hand on the Faith if their own formation wasn’t strong, and some really do believe in their hearts that stretching to invest in Catholic school tuition is the extent of their responsibility to form their children. Pastors and parish leaders are frustrated, parents don’t see the value in their effort or investment, and the two rarely meet in the middle.

**TRUTH #2 – PROFILES OF OUR PRIESTS**

For most Mass-going Catholics, their practice of the faith is correlated to their perceptions of their pastor. I am the first to say that leadership matters, but our research has pointed out what I believe to be an unhealthy dependency on our priests. A parishioner today is 11 times more likely to recommend their parish if they like their pastor. Moreover, they are 4 times more likely to say the parish is helping them grow spiritually if they like their pastor.

At CLI, we administer the DISC profile – a commonly used tool in the corporate world – to a huge population of priests and bishops. Seventy-five percent of
our clergy are instinctively wired to be conflict and/or change averse. That doesn't mean they can't handle change or conflict, but if they do not have a healthy understanding of themselves, they are much less likely to respond consciously and effectively.

I don't think this is the only explanation for our crisis. But we need to understand these characteristics of our priests and bishops if we hope to make sense of it. I do know that many of these men can quickly become overwhelmed and paralyzed in the face of great disruption and conflict, and they can make the wrong decision. If our pastors have our confidence, we think the parish is in good shape. But they also need confidence in their decision-making, especially in tough situations.

**TRUTH #1: WE'VE GOT ATTACHMENT ANXIETY**

One of the pressures I have seen that drives leadership decisions the wrong way is our attachment to “stuff.” I see it on the largest of levels and the smallest of levels. We see the effects of an overextended infrastructure in places like the Northeast that are consolidating parishes. But across the country, whether it's our Mass schedule or our pet ministry, by and large we, the laity, are resistant to give anything up. We want change, but we don't want it in our backyards – and when we demand it, we give very little thought to implications. We want the right to our parish but not necessarily the responsibilities.

In my extensive experience onsite, our clergy are change averse but their primary fear when it comes to change is what our reaction will be. Sometimes that is justified, oftentimes it is an assumed constraint. The reality is we have both a priest shortage problem and a pew shortage problem.

We have to plan for a smaller institutional footprint, not with peril, but with intentionality.

It strikes me that the Early Church had one great advantage – they had nothing to lose but their life. When we think about some of the greatest companies or leaders, they often start from nothing and/or they aren’t afraid to lose everything. The more we try to hold onto things out of fear of loss rather than purpose of mission, we will see the stress levels exasperated, debt and deferred maintenance grow, and worst of all, our time will constantly be consumed on temporal issues.

**FACING THE FUTURE WITH HOPE**

So what does the parish of tomorrow (and today) require? Catholic parishes need to reclaim the basic foundational purpose of their existence and embrace a missionary impulse reminiscent of the Early Church. The parishes we have studied that are poised for the future are focused on the Eucharist and a clear purpose – to go and bring people home.

What we call the “Next Generation Parish” is grounded in the Church’s wisdom and present in people’s everyday lives. It is central for those who are seeking and those who are sent out to seek. While it may continue to be headquartered in the parish hall, it can no longer be restricted to a single destination. It must be, as described in The Joy of the Gospel, “capable of self-renewal and adaptivity, living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters.” In the Next Generation Parish, the Eucharist is a priority rather than a commodity to be distributed in the most convenient manner possible.

The Next Generation Parish cultivates a community that knows it is a part of the larger Body of Christ. It deepens faith not in buildings, personalities, or structures, but in Jesus. The Next Generation Parish spurs among its members a boundless hope for the potential that exists in those who don’t yet know or follow the Lord.

Catholic Leadership Institute and several other apostolates, institutions, and movements have provided a wealth of research on what makes a parish effective. Looking across the breadth of what has been surfaced, we believe there are four key drivers to a vibrant parish that lives out its call.

The Next Generation Catholic parish...

- fosters spiritual maturity and a plan for discipleship of its members;
- shares leadership and maintains a commitment to a healthy organization;
- consistently offers an intentional and excellent experience of Sunday Eucharist;
- and most importantly, the pastor and the people embrace a missionary impulse to go out and bring others to know Jesus.

Daniel Cellucci is the Chief Executive Officer of the Catholic Leadership Institute.
“Let the Church always be a place of mercy and hope, where everyone is welcome, loved, and forgiven.”
—Pope Francis

Summary

Using data from parishes and dioceses across the country, Dan Cellucci outlines the four major issues facing Catholic parishes today: declining numbers of practicing parishioners; handing on the Faith to the next generation; conflict-averse clergy, and attachment to “the way things are.” If parishes are not only to survive but thrive moving forward, they have to get back to basics: providing opportunities to encounter Jesus Christ and then share that joy with others.

Questions for Conversation

1. Describe life in your parish. Does it reflect the “hard truths” outlined above or does it resemble the “next generation parish”?
2. Do you associate the health and vitality of your parish with your pastor? With the lay members? With both?
3. What role might God be asking you to play in revitalizing your parish?
G.K. Chesterton once commented that every modern conversation begins one step too late. His assertion pertains, unfortunately, when we think of the Church. Immediately we tend to think of its structure: there are the ordained, the religious, and the laity. According to this reckoning, the laity are defined in a negative manner: they are the ones who are neither ordained nor members of religious orders. If one is a Catholic, and neither ordained nor a religious, then one is lay; it cannot be helped.

There is, as a result, a paradigmatic clericalism within the Church. It is not ill-intended. I would argue that it is not intended at all, but it is present nonetheless. There is a widespread assumption in the Catholic community that, to have any real agency in the Church, it is necessary that one be ordained.

That the laity have no agency in the Church is not magisterial teaching; it is not, in fact, true. Yet it is the paradigm through which we relate to each other and through which we tend to filter our understanding of magisterial teaching. This apprehension is founded on, and fostered by, the common conception that the purpose of the Church is predominantly, or even exclusively, the care of souls. We read in the Second Vatican Council’s decree Christus dominus that “the parish exists solely for the care of souls.” The purpose of the care of souls is personal holiness, our salvation in Christ, which translates in our communal imagination as an invitation to personal piety.

The common conception would seem to suggest that the ordinary vocation of lay men and women is a vocation to be cared for, especially through their par-
participation in the sacraments. That this is the paradigm that governs Catholic imagination is manifested in the fact that lay men and women tend to identify the Church with the hierarchy, and therefore to disenfranchise themselves.

When Catholics say “the Church teaches” they really mean “the hierarchy teaches,” or when Catholics say “the Church believes” they tend to mean “bishops and priests believe.” They count themselves out. The Church therefore comes to be identified with the bishops and the ordained. What follows from this improper identification is that, when a bishop is immoral, the whole Church is held to be corrupt.

Clearly, there are problems with this paradigm. First, personal piety is an insufficient basis for witnessing the faith to others, or even for imparting it to one’s children. There is therefore a widespread presumption in the Catholic community that conversation about the Faith and instruction in the Faith must be left to experts.

Second, this paradigm tends to infantilize one’s relationship with Jesus. The relation is one in which the layperson never acts with Jesus, never stands in his place—a function reserved to the clergy—but merely receives the grace that he affords for the sake of personal holiness. Adult in all other aspects of their lives and secular responsibilities, many Catholics still conceive of themselves as dependent children in their relationship to Christ and the Church.

A half-century ago, at the Second Vatican Council, the role of the laity was taken up for the first time in the Church’s history at an ecumenical council. [Yves] Congar had remarked that, for the ecclesial role proper to the laity to come fully into view, the hierarchy had to come to two realizations: first, there is a world out there; and, second, it is not the Church. The council, as we well know, added to the care of souls a more fundamental duty of the Church: to incarnate the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ for the sake of the world.

This suggests a different paradigm, one in which the laity are “co-responsible” with the hierarchy in the Church’s mission. Real co-responsibility would require at least four things. First, if we are really co-responsible for the mission, then we must be equally responsible for it. The clergy are not more responsible for the mission of the Church than the laity are. Second, if we are co-responsible, then our tasks for the sake of the mission must be seen to have equal dignity.

Third, we must have equal voice in discerning the mission. We must learn to take counsel together and to discuss the way in which the Church’s mission is to be fulfilled in our parishes and dioceses. Fourth, we must learn to exercise mutual accountability for the sake of the Church’s mission. Whereas the pastor has personal responsibility for the governance of the parish, he is nonetheless accountable to our Lord, in whose place he presides. Similarly, in the exercise of their apostolate to the world, lay men and women are accountable, not to the pastor, but to the Lord who has commissioned them. Together accountable to our Lord, pastor and laity are accountable to each other.

The current crisis of the Church can only be resolved through a new paradigm centered upon the redemptive mission of Christ—a mission for which all of us, lay and ordained, are called to take our place, co-responsible in our participation in the one priesthood of Christ.

Michael Sweeney, OP, is the Co-founder and Executive Director of the Lay Mission Project.

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“Baptism makes each one of the lay faithful a missionary disciple of the Lord, salt of the earth, light of the world, and leaven that transforms reality from within.”  
—Pope Francis

Summary
In this essay, Father Michael Sweeney uses Church teaching and Scripture to make the case that the ordained ministers of the Church and the laity are co-responsible for the mission of the Church. Sweeney makes the case that the laity can often be complicit in clericalism, in that they do not fully appreciate their baptismal call and responsibility. In the end, all members of the Church are called to “incarnate the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ for the sake of the world.”

Questions for Conversation
1. Sweeney makes a bold claim that lay persons can perpetuate clericalism, by acting in a way that reinforces the idea that the Church’s ordained ministers are more responsible for the mission of the Church than the People of God. Do you agree or disagree?
2. Have you seen good examples of clergy and lay people working together for the mission of the Church? Describe those times or examples.
3. Where do you sense that God is calling you to exercise your baptismal call to “make disciples of all nations” or to be “salt, light, and leaven” in the world?
GATHERING PRAYER

Be With Us Today
St. Thomas More (1478-1535)

Father in heaven, you have given us a mind to know you, a will to serve you, and a heart to love you. Be with us today in all that we do, so that your light may shine out in our lives. Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

For more information about Faith Feeds, visit bc.edu/c21faithfeeds

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