SEEDS OF HOPE
Young Adults and the Catholic Church in the United States

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I met the future of America. I looked into the eyes of the future of America. The future of America is very bright, it's very hopeful, it's very promising. It's in the teachings of Christ. It's in your young people. America, best days are yet to come.

—Pope John Paul II
Introduction
Is There Hope for the Catholic Church in the United States?

When Paul found himself speaking to a group of Athenian philosophers at the Areopagus, Luke the evangelist describes his eloquent attempts to use the language of philosophy in order to preach the good news about the risen Jesus Christ. I can imagine the scene: a passionate preacher of the gospel, one who has undergone a profound conversion experience and who has endured a great many persecutions for the sake of spreading the gospel, is hoping to persuade his interlocutors that the one true God has acted in human history in an absolutely profound way. From his second letter to the Corinthians, we have a clue about the kind of life Paul was leading:

Five times I have received...the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. (2 Cor 11:24–27)

In spite of all these hardships, Paul presses on with a kind of urgency that I marvel at. He is accustomed to being marginalized
or the target of violence, so his situation in the midst of the Athenians is really nothing new.

In his address, which I once heard a bishop describe as Paul’s most eloquent, but least accepted, Paul says the following to the philosophers:

The God who made the world and everything in it does not live in shrines made of human hands...He made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” (Acts 17:24–28, emphasis added)

Paul’s exhortation to the Athenians is a remarkable attempt to translate the fundamental good news about Jesus into a worldview that the philosophers might accept. He emphasizes that human beings are stung with the desire to know God, even in a world that is complex and that sometimes makes it seem as though God is far away.

For Paul, as for the other authors of the New Testament literature, hope was a gift of God because it was based in what they understood to be the consummation of human existence: eternal life with God, the evidence of which was the life of Jesus Christ. For them, this hope was so powerful and so profound that they were willing to risk everything in order to proclaim it. Paul’s description of his life as an apostle manifests something of the depth of his commitment—he is saying, in essence, that he was willing to suffer any hardship in order to proclaim the good news about Christ.

The earliest Christian communities were communities of hope. The Church emerged from a crucible of suffering because it was founded on this deep hope in the power of Christ and of the gospel. Its treasure, we learn in a famous story about the life of Saint Lawrence, was not in its wealth or its buildings but in the
faith of its people. What can we in the United States today, who live in a fractured Church, learn from these communities of hope?

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we face challenges to our hope that are very different from the persecutions faced by the early apostolic and patristic-era churches. Then, proclamation of Christian faith was itself an act of hope, because before the age of Constantine, to be a Catholic was to be a possible target of violence. Today, at least in the United States, we benefit from the sacrifices of earlier generations who slowly overcame anti-Catholic sentiment to assume positions of leadership within our society. Our challenges are very different, because many of them come from within the very structures of the Church itself, while others come from the relationships that we in the Church have with the wider world. We proclaim a gospel of hope, but many experience a Church that sometimes obscures that hope. Within our Church are people who have been abused by priests; people who struggle with same-sex attraction and who do not see other Catholics as resources for growing in holiness; women who are perplexed by the absence of women in leadership positions; people who lament the polarization that exists on issues like the liturgy, the public voice of bishops, and the consistency of social teachings. The Church is an imperfect place even as it seeks to be an iconic witness to a God who speaks the gospel of love. Yet I am convinced that this sometimes dysfunctional Church nevertheless can be a place of grace and beauty, a place where we celebrate what is most noble in the human heart as it reaches, often in spite of itself, toward God—and, indeed, I am convinced that today we are deeply in need of this imperfect Church, even as we ask how it can be better.

I am only too familiar with the objections, which I encounter on a daily basis in my work: the Church is out of touch; it is a medieval construct with antiquated sensibilities and byzantine practices. The Church is a men’s club whose leadership is so unaware of women’s issues that it cannot possibly speak to their most profound yearnings. The Church is too European to speak to the emerging global order whose center of gravity is moving south and east. The Church is homophobic and unable to speak with any authority on human sexuality, especially after the sexual abuse cri-
The Church is divided among itself, with conservatives and liberals arguing over issues that many of its younger members don’t even understand. The Church is removed from the rest of the world, seeking to advance its own peculiar worldview, either oblivious to or critical of the ways that the rest of humanity confronts the most profound existential questions about our future on the planet.

These are serious objections, and I do not pretend to minimize or ignore them. It is perhaps my peculiarly American sensibility, though, that persuades me that citizenship in an organization is not the same as absolute acceptance of the current state of affairs. Instead, authentic citizenship has more to do with choosing to love those around us with whom we break bread. Being a Catholic today is not a historical given the way it once was, when generations shared faith the way they shared a family name. It is a deliberate choice to look at the world in a particular way, based not only on the teachings of Jesus, but also on the development of that uniquely “Catholic imagination.” In my experience, it is precisely this imagination that enables people to negotiate the fundamental questions of human living in a graced manner. Catholicism is not simply about agreeing with what the Church teaches; it is about being invited to look at the world in the way that Jesus taught the disciples to, and to share with others a history of practice designed to lead us into greater communion with God and each other.

I want to suggest in this book that active participation in the life of the Church is valuable to help younger Catholics—even those whose experience with the Church is ambivalent—to address the most pressing issues in our postmodern world, at both the individual and communal levels. Further, I offer reflections on some of the particular challenges facing the Church as it considers its younger members, suggesting ways consistent with its fidelity to the teachings of Jesus to be a catalyst for positive change in the world. Today, the global order is being shaped profoundly by nations and corporations that operate out of insufficiently expansive notions of self-interest. In such a context, religious communities—especially those of a global scale like the Catholic Church—have an important prophetic role. We need communities of people who share a faith that involves a truly “catholic” understanding of human flourish-
ing. We need people who struggle daily to avoid unjust practices like purchasing goods made with sweatshop labor; consuming at a rate disproportionate with the rest of the world; neglecting the poor and disenfranchised members of society; engaging in sexual behavior that corrodes human dignity. We need people who choose to enter into solidarity with the suffering of the world, rather than pad their own nests. We need, in other words, a "corporation" or "body" that offers more than the individualistic, consumeristic, superficial, immature ethics of so much of contemporary culture.

While at times I lose optimism that the Church can fulfill these hopes, I am convinced of two things. The first is a practical recognition of the extent of the Catholic Church, both in the United States and around the world. This Church can exercise the kind of moral and political influence to counter those forces that destroy human lives because of crushing poverty and dehumanizing transnational corporate greed, to name but two examples. The second is a theological point. Cornel West once remarked that he was not optimistic about the future of race relations in the United States, but that he nevertheless had hope. This remark offers insight into the perspective many U.S. Catholics bring toward their Church, and resonates well with the ancient understanding of the martyr (martyrion, Greek for "witness") as one whose self-sacrifice provided seed for the future of the Church. There are many signs that might lead the contemporary U.S. Catholic to despair, but to hope is to recognize that the life of the Church is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit. We who value Catholic tradition often do so in spite of what the Church is actually up to, but mindful that the practice of Catholic faith is nevertheless an invitation to listen deeply to the call of God through the words and actions of Jesus.

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[Jesus said,] “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the
sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!" (Matt 13:3–9)

Jesus’ parable of the sower is a blueprint for the future of the U.S. Catholic Church. There are many who seek to take the role of the sower—the one who distributes wisdom liberally across all ideological spectra, expecting it to take root and bear fruit in justice, goodness, and peace. Yet it is a sobering reflection; it suggests to us that social change is not as simple as speaking loudly about beliefs. For decades—indeed, centuries—Catholics have expected that their leaders would speak loudly, and thereby produce a yield of faithful followers. That model, while influential in the shaping of the modern world, is no longer sufficient. The future of Catholic faith cannot depend solely on good preaching or proclamation. The ground has become almost infertile, and must be worked before the seed can take root.

There is a note of hope, though, behind this sobering reflection. Jesus does not tell us in the parable how it came to be that some soil was rich. It is provocative to imagine that the rich soil became so because of the decay of refuse over time—a compost heap of abandoned ideas, worldviews that have grown passé, texts that have faded into the background of history. Decay of older matter fertilizes the soil, making it ready to produce new fruit. Perhaps this lesson also applies to social change for those of us who live in the shadows of the cultural revolutions of the twentieth-century Church. Perhaps even as conservatives and liberals, advocates of Neo-Scholasticism or of liberation theology, advocates of return to the Tridentine Mass or champions of liturgical change continue to wage their ideological battles amid the graying of the Vatican II generation, even now there are growing what Justin Martyr called in the second century “seeds of the word” among younger Catholics. Perhaps even as we witness the decay of public discourse among entrenched older Catholics, younger ones unaware of the nature of the current debates are discovering that the worldviews
they have inherited from postmodern American society are suffocating. Many have recognized the weaknesses of these worldviews, and have begun to ask deeply spiritual questions—seeds that, if cultivated, will sprout into radically new expressions of Christian faith.

This book proposes ways of envisioning a Church that will cultivate these seeds of hope. It addresses two related concerns. The first is that of young people, many who have been raised Catholic, but who believe that the Catholic Church has become irrelevant and unresponsive to their needs. The second is that of older Catholics who are concerned by forces in U.S. society that seem to be eroding the faith of young people. What I propose in this book is that the hope of U.S. Catholicism is its unique power to invite young people to see the world in ways that challenge the extremes of postmodern American culture, ways that do greater justice to the fundamental yearnings of the human heart.

This book is at once a theological and a practical proposal. Theologically, it takes seriously our desires for meaning, for hope, and for justice, by paying attention to Catholic tradition as a deposit of wisdom about human flourishing in relationship with God. Practically, it recognizes the gross disparities in our nation and in our world, which hamper our abilities to live in communion with our brothers and sisters, especially in the developing world. It suggests that these disparities force us to confront how our spiritual yearnings must lead us to grow beyond selfish approaches to spirituality, and to confront fundamental questions about what it means to respond to the will of God in a fractured, unjust world. Personal spirituality is an important movement in the lives of all people, and it is good that we cultivate spiritual growth—as long as it does not descend into narcissistic idolatry of the self. Authentic spiritual growth must involve joining with others to address systemic questions about the social sins of poverty, racism, classism, sexism, and others. Ideally, a Catholic worldview ought to bind us together as a community of hopeful vision, one that seeks the will of God sometimes in union with, sometimes in contrast to, prevailing cultural norms. It ought to be a community in pilgrimage toward God. I want to suggest that to the extent that it seeks this kind of authenticity, it will not only attract young people in their hunger for spirituality; it will also be a transforming force in the world.
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I seek to convey a hopeful picture of the Catholic Church in the United States even while recognizing its sins and limitations. For even in the wake of sexual abuse scandals, U.S. Catholicism holds a great deal of power to influence both members and the wider American society. Today, our challenge as Catholics is to recognize the way our Church has failed to follow Jesus’ example, and to engage in the process of renewal. Forty years have passed since the close of Vatican II, which was the most significant renewal movement in modern Church history. Today, as the generation born after the Council reaches adulthood, we must again face the challenging questions that Christians of all ages must face: What does Jesus’ teaching mean for us? How must I live? What must we do as a society to practice justice? In short, this book seeks to offer a model of how the Catholic Church in the United States can again respond to “the signs of the times.” More fundamentally, it suggests that the Catholic Church is unique in its social and political power to foster a vision of human living that truly dignifies the person, often in contrast to the prevailing moral norms of popular culture in the United States (and indeed, the world). The traditional term used to designate the cultivation of such a vision, or worldview, is formation.

RELIGIOUS FORMATION?

The most significant barrier to the formation of young people today is the complexity of this postmodern world. There are so many competing voices and forces at work that the need for the shelter of community is ever present. Younger Catholics, who have grown up in an entirely post–Vatican II Church, have often not known the nourishing value of a culture of faith, as did their parents and grandparents. Even the population of younger immigrants is becoming more assimilated to contemporary U.S. culture than to the cultural Catholicism of their parents or grandparents. Several studies show that Catholics born after Vatican II have the least connection to the institutional Church, meaning that it simply does not represent for them the community that most shapes their worldview.

In his book All That’s Holy, Tom Levinson chronicles his pilgrimage across the United States in search of why people believe
what they do. Early in his travels, he speaks with a young Catholic Volunteer Corps' member, whose description of her relationship to the Catholic Church is illustrative of the attitudes many younger Catholics have. Of his conversation partner, he writes, "we shared both early religious disenchantment and popular cultural fluency." Levinson is inquisitive about her commitment to engage in social justice work even amid her ambivalence toward the Church. Her reply manifests a point that statistical evidence in the studies by Dean Hoge and others demonstrates is widespread.

I just realized that I couldn't separate myself, and who I was, from my tradition of being raised Catholic. And I've come to think of it as not any better or worse than anybody else's tradition. It just happens that it's the tradition I was raised in. I think I really kind of came to terms with what that meant for me. It didn't mean that I had to embrace all the tenets or beliefs of the Church. It was okay that I didn't do that. I didn't have to leave the Church, either. But where at one point I felt like, oh, I've got to leave the Church, it's so terrible, and I'd ask friends, "How can you stay in the Church?" I think I came to the point where I felt like, this is my tradition. This is how I was raised.

The young woman describes the location of her faith in a way with which many older Catholics are unfamiliar. Having grown up within the sanctuary of a faith community, many view society from within the parameters of that community's perspective. Young Catholics, however, are at once insiders and outsiders with regard to the Church. They are insiders to the extent that they know some of the language and basic ideas, having gone through religious education. Yet they are also outsiders, seeing the Church as their parents' or grandparents' institution. Their formation has been more profoundly influenced by popular culture than by Catholicism, and so they are likely to see the terms of their faith through the lens of culture, rather than vice versa. Instead of standing firmly within the community of faith in order to critique U.S. culture, they stand firmly within U.S. culture in order to critique the Church. As a
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result, they are likely to appropriate only those elements of the tradition that do not threaten their cultural position.

If the communities to which we belong—especially at an early age—form our worldviews, then we must ask serious questions about the communities (formal or informal) that form the worldviews of young people. To be sure, there is still a population of young Catholics who have frequented youth ministry events and maybe even a World Youth Day or two. It is clear, though, that the contemporary U.S. Catholic Church is doing a poor job of welcoming Catholics born after the mid 1960s, who now comprise over forty percent of the Church. The majority of younger Catholics are part of the larger U.S. cultural landscape, and thus confront the issue of religious formation only obliquely. Many, at least among whites, are well educated. All live in a pluralist culture, meaning that there is a bewildering marketplace of ideas and worldviews. And they have come to the conclusion that individual conscience is the best guide to navigating this marketplace. They are American—strongly individualistic to the core, and will seek out what they need to know.

The Internet is the perfect medium in such a culture, an emblem of this marketplace of ideas. Yet it is still so new that we have not had the time to appreciate how it is changing our perception of ourselves. One thing, however, is clear: with the availability of more knowledge than we can ever use, people must learn what they wish to learn. Information is formation: the kind of people we become depends to a great extent on what we come to know.⁹

There is a religious dimension to this information-formation. The word religion comes from the Latin root ligare, which means “to bind,” and carries a connotation of permanent relationship. All human beings are religious in one way or another. Our religion is that to which we bind ourselves in communion with others. Our religion is our worldview: it is the way we choose to live in the world, the way we choose to grow in community, the way we shape our individual choices, the way we structure our hope. Even before we learn something, we must deem it valuable—we must choose to pick up a specific magazine, turn to a specific channel, click on a specific Web site. What always lies behind our choices is the influence of a community, even if that influence is something we’ve
never thought about. The things we choose to learn are valuable to us because they in some way help us to negotiate our lives in a complex world. We can learn a great deal about a person by simply paying attention to what keeps his or her interest. We learn something about how the person sees himself or herself in relation to others, something about what he or she deems important. There is something that binds people together who subscribe to *Sports Illustrated* or to *People*. There is a shared bond among people who watch *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. There is a common understanding among those who read the poetry of Maya Angelou or the novels of John Grisham.

How do young people learn the formative role of information? How are they formed by the information culture in which they live? If information in its many forms is so pervasive and omnipresent, how can we be certain that their formation is sound? How can we guide them toward formation that does justice to their true selves? These are only some of the questions that we must raise in the information age. Parents, schools, youth groups, and colleges and universities must ask them in a particular way, for they have privileged places in the formation of young people. In my own world of higher education, I see the beginnings of serious debate over this formative role of information. Religious leaders, too, are slowly coming to realize what is at stake. They see how young people are influenced more by popular U.S. culture than by the culture of the Church. They are beginning to understand the challenge of religious formation of young people who have been so systematically formed in a consumerist society.

The religion of the United States today is consumerism, and its influence is both subtle and pervasive. From the earliest age, children are immersed in this religion. They are taught its doctrines of buying and selling, learn its language through advertising and shopping, practice its rituals at birthdays and (its high holy day) Christmas. If information is formation, then perhaps the most fundamental formative aspect of consumerism is that so much information is related to buying and selling. Radio, television, almost all published media, and the Internet come with price tags. The most influential figures in the lives of young people are not in most cases religious leaders: they are entertainers and sports figures, people