

Bernard J, Lee, S.M.
Professor of Theology
blesm@stmarytx.edu

St. Mary's University
San Antonio, Texas

YOUNG ADULTS & Contemporary Catholicism

Young adults are not angry at the church/ They are simply distanced from it. *Young Adult Catholics, Dean Hoge, et al.*

I am honored by your invitation to speak to issues about base communities in the United States Catholic Church. While there are some 38,000-40,000 base communities in the U.S. Catholic Church, rather few of those members are young adults (late teens, twenties and thirties). *It's a good bet that for some generations, those who follow today's young adults will also resemble them, which will have profound effects in the development of Christian/Catholic culture in the United States, (but with clear resonances in wider Western culture, or so I postulate).* But that's a guess. For now I focus on young adults in current American culture.

In the United States there are about 50,000,000 young adults. A fourth of this large group, some 12,500,000 young adults, self-identify as Catholic. Only 17-19% of these younger folks are fairly regular participants in Catholic life (about 20-22% for older Catholics). The 80% who are not regular participants nonetheless claim Catholic identity. In many ways "Catholic" is a cultural as well as a religious identifier. That has been a regular pattern for some time now.

About a dozen years ago, assisted by very substantial grants from Lily Endowment, a team of four sociologists, one anthropologist and six theologians planned and carried out research concerning small Christian communities in the U.S. Catholic Church (some 38,000-40,000 of them). We counted those who meet at least every three weeks—most meet every week (especially Hispanic

communities) or every two weeks. We also tried to identify and count those who felt both “gathered” and “sent.” We did not ask for ages, but it was clear from the community meetings we attended that young adults were a noticeable minority.

Our hope is especially to reach some of them through Campus Ministry in the 220 Catholic institutions of higher learning in the United States, and through Newman Centers in public universities. I am the current Board President of the Small Christian Community Collaborative, a national organization. In our strategizing, we are formulating a strong emphasis upon young adults. This is a new central priority for us—not a sole priority but a privileged one.

I can say clearly that while traditional SCC members (the elder groups) do care about the shape of the world outside of their gathering, they *tend to be more attentive* to being gathered than to being sent (in mission). The social scientists in our research team judged this interest in gathering with others to be a response to the strength of individualism in U.S. culture, named already by Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s and by multiple social scientists regularly ever since—I have in mind especially the work of Robert Bellah.

Those of us who are regularly involved with young adults in American Catholic Universities are hoping to initiate some intensified focus upon a conversation about strategies. Instead of gathering those interested in their faith and in connecting with others, we are proposing to use social interest and social commitment as the gathering dynamic—making the world better and safer, touching profound human need. In a phrase, to start with “being sent,” and when there is some cohesiveness that begins to show up, to invite an exploration of community, of being gathered—of interpersonal religious commitment—as both a bonding and “sending” dynamic of faith. Full Christianhood is necessarily gathered and sent—community and mission belong together. Some

of us are guessing that for today's young adults Catholics, "sending" will attract attention sooner than "gathering."

There have been a number of books in recent years on young adult Catholics in the U.S. Catholic Church (bibliography attached). I quote from one which has help formed my work with young adults:

While young adult Catholics rank social justice high in what they regard as essential to their faith, the relationship between social justice and a *specific Catholic identity* remains unclear . . . If the relationship between social justice and a specifically Catholic identity were more immediate to young adult Catholicism, their perspective might be more concerned with structural approaches, aggregate effects, power, and institutional systems—in keeping with contemporary Church teachings regarding social justice. (*Young Adult Catholics*, Dean Hoge et al., Univ. of Notre Dame Press, p. 224.

This clearly corresponds to my experience of young adults. This is not so much a simple lack of interest in institutional religion, but a piece of "the times."

(S)ignificant numbers of of young adult Catholics today no longer see the Roman Catholic church as unique or essential, the pope as necessary, the Church's structures as important, or tradition as a source of objective truth . . . This is not exclusively a failure of leadership. It is part of the larger alienation of all authoritative institutions that is taking place in all American religious communities, p. 221.

I have tried to name what I believe are two issues in the U.S. Catholic Church. One is that the majority of our 40,000 base communities are more attentive to gathering than to being sent (but "gathering" does indeed play a redemptive role *vis-a-vis* American individualism). Second is that young adults deserve some prioritized attention vis-à-vis their *social* agency in the world, and

base communities are a way of connecting social agency with sound Christian hearts, heads, and feet.

While there is not time to pursue this at length, I believe largely in the development of what some are calling a postmodern world, which gives up on any meta-system, insisting that every system of thought will illuminate some areas, but not all areas. One gives up on meta-systems and that includes metaphysics.

The postmodern condition . . . manifests itself in the multiplication of centres of power and activity and the dissolution of every kind of totalizing narrative which claims to govern the whole complex field of social activity and representation. (Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwood, 1989, p. 9)

I am not presuming that young adults have thought it out self-consciously in these terms, or that they have ever heard of “postmodern.” But it is my experience that their lack of interest in a single, universalizing system of thought is a postmodernist instinct at work. Catholic theology (both systematic and pastoral) will have to reckon with the impact relativized postmodern understandings. Totalizing structures of thought are giving way to historically conditioned structures of thought and interpretation. It will not always be easy for Catholic thought to retrain some of its tendencies in a postmodern intellectual world.

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I am an ordained Marianist. This order, the Society of Mary, was founded in Bordeaux, France by le Pere Guillaume Joseph Chaminade, in the aftermath of the French Revolution. This was the dramatic ending of feudalism in civil structures, but not, unfortunately, in ecclesial structures. Chaminade began to gather Catholics in small groups, “base communities” in today’s terms. They ran the gamut of ages. But he had a penchant for young adults because, in his

words, “young adults are the artisans of whatever world comes next into existence.” He meant both the civil world and the church world. Those instincts have shaped the reflections that precede. “Young adults,” said Fr. Chaminade, “are the artisans of whatever world next comes into existence.”

While I have focused my reflections on young adults Catholics, I do so with huge gratitude for efforts and resources in U.S. Catholic culture for base communities. I have in mind the work of Fr. Art Baranowski and “National Alliance of Parishes Restructuring into Communities,” the national and international work of Renew, the Pastoral Office for Small Christian Communities (Hartford, Connecticut), the Marianist Lay Network of North America. These and multiple other SCC connections are listed in the Appendices of the book, *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities*, which summarized the research supported by the Lily Endowment.