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# Here Come the Nones! Pluralism and Evangelization after Denominationalism and Americanism

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**HERE COME THE NONES!**  
**Pluralism and Evangelization after Denominationalism and Americanism**

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By William L. Portier

Abstract:

This essay begins with a four-part overview of American Catholic history focused on the building and dissolution of an immigrant Catholic subculture. The final period, "Catholics and the Dynamics of Pluralism (1968-present)" leads naturally into a discussion of the demography of Catholics in the United States. Particular attention is given to the trend to disaffiliation among millennials and how best to interpret it. Pastoral and theological reflections on the demography of disaffiliation emphasize the need for the church in the United States to take on an evangelical form more suited to a pluralism that is post-denominational and post-Americanist, and how this need might be approached in terms of "evangelization" as described in the 1975 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Concluding thoughts sketch some important characteristics of an evangelical church, more concerned with its mission and witness in the world than with maintaining its internal life.

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**No More Catholic Culture** - Back in 1967, a group of scholars based at The Catholic University in Washington produced the first edition of the multi-volume *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.<sup>1</sup> The Council's collective effervescence still bubbled in America. Grandchildren of the immigrants filled convents, rectories, and seminaries. *Humanae Vitae* was a year away. Produced in a relatively thick and confident subculture, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* had no entry on "Evangelization."

Less than a decade later, Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) introduced "evangelization" as a thematic emphasis in contemporary Catholic discourse. What happened between 1967 and 1975 to bring evangelization to the fore? A simple and inevitably oversimplified answer is the postwar dissolution of Catholic subcultures in many western countries. During these years, for example, "decolumnization" in the Netherlands and the fate of Bavarian Catholicism in Germany gave context to

the theologies of Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner respectively. France is another story. In the United States, at this time, Catholics became demographically indistinguishable from other Americans. Their immigrant subculture had done its work well and began to dissolve into American pluralism.

From *Evangelii Nuntiandi* to the present, Catholic literature on evangelization is at one in pointing to the challenge of the separation of Gospel and culture. Catholic culture locates the church in real places and embodies it in shared daily practices. Culture gives rise to what was once a signature Catholic sense that the church is there before you get there. It's just always there. Contemporary pluralism makes the church more voluntary than it has ever been since the Hellenistic age. It problematizes the very Catholic idea of the church and makes it unmistakably clear that, in the words of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the church exists to preach the Gospel. In 1967, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* still had culture. We instead have pluralism, voluntarism, and evangelization. This essay divides into three necessarily brief parts: 1) an immigrant subculture, how it came about and then dissolved, 2) the demography of disaffiliation and possible interpretations of it, and 3) some pastoral and theological reflections followed by concluding thoughts.

**History** – The story of Catholics in the United States can be told in four parts. Each contributes something central to understanding the present. **Colonial and Republican Catholics (1521-1820)** – In the new republic, the transnational Catholic Church met for the first time the seeming benign face of modern politics. “When I signed the Declaration of Independence,” wrote Charles Carroll of Carrollton, “I had a view not only our independence of England but the toleration of all sects, professing the Christian religion, and communicating to them all great rights.” His cousin John Carroll, named first bishop of Baltimore in 1789, claimed that with American independence he had experienced a religious revolution greater than the political one. He credited the United States with having “banished intolerance from their system of government.”<sup>2</sup>

The toleration the Carrolls celebrated makes “religious affiliation,” regardless of its theological valence, legally voluntary. Over time this tends to lead to increasing religious pluralism. Historians ordinarily identify voluntarism and pluralism as the salient characteristics of American “religion.” After the Revolution, Baptists and Methodists on the frontier exploited these characteristic features of modern politics to forge an anti-institutional religious ethos in which people believed that one became a Christian through personal conversion to Jesus Christ rather than through the traditional inheritance of a culture.

We might call this ethos “evangelical” and regard it as the form of Christianity best suited to the freedoms of modern politics. It is fascinating to speculate on what might have happened to the small body of English Catholics and their descendants in such a religious environment. But a new variable intervened and postponed for more than a century a full blown encounter between Catholics and the voluntary and pluralistic religious forms bred by the Revolution. That variable was the 33.6 million immigrants who came to the U.S. from Europe between 1820 and 1920.

**Immigrant Catholics (1820-1920)** – Irish and Germans were followed by Italians and Eastern Europeans. By 1850 they made Catholics “the largest single body of churchgoers in the nation.”<sup>3</sup> Nativism peaked simultaneously. Immigrants built the railroads and bridges of America’s urban centers. The music, art, and architecture of devotional Catholicism, not always the best, fed their souls and shaped their imaginations and affections. The end of the nineteenth century saw hyper-assimilationist Catholics or Americanists pitted against their separatist counterparts in a series of controversies over whether the U.S. was a benign or hostile place for Catholics. Separatists were suspicious of a *de facto* Protestant culture that put a premium on individual autonomy and achievement. Americanists proclaimed a providential fit, based in the natural law, between “America” and Catholicism. Not only would America be good for Catholics, but Catholics would save America and help it reach its promise. In 1899 Leo XIII’s censure of “Americanism,” the introduction of a false sense of liberty into the church in

imitation of modern states, put a temporary halt to this assimilationist project, but, as a central aspect of immigrant Catholic experience, the Americanist impulse continued to take on new forms well into the twentieth century.

**Building and Dissolution of an Immigrant Catholic Subculture (1920-1968)** – With the end of the Great War, the subsequent closing of U.S. borders to new immigrants, and a secular culture beginning to overwhelm the native Protestant one, generations of “brick and mortar” bishops used the proudly given voluntary contributions of the laity to build an impressive immigrant subculture. A far from air-tight network of parishes, schools, hospitals, and social service agencies (all staffed largely by religious Sisters), along with fraternal and professional organizations like the Knights of Columbus, protected many Catholics from nativism, simultaneously socialized them as Americans, and set them on the road to economic prosperity. At the same time, the subculture buffered most Catholics from having to face the long-term corrosive effects religious pluralism and voluntarism tend to have on traditional forms of faith.

By the end of World War II in 1945, immigration had been closed for two decades. The GI Bill opened the doors to higher education for many ethnic Catholic returning veterans. In 1960 Americans narrowly elected John F. Kennedy president. Descended from Boston Irish, Kennedy had been to Harvard and served with distinction in World War II. By the end of the 1960s, there were many more Catholics like Kennedy. According to such measures as education and income levels, they soon became statistically indistinguishable from other Americans. Though many of its institutions still remain, this demographic point signaled the end of the immigrant Catholic subculture. It coincided with the turbulence of the 1960s and the implementation of the Second Vatican Council.

Democracy American style emerged from World War II having banished from the moral high ground its competitors on both left and right. At Vatican II, the World War II generation put an end to the Church’s conflicts with modern states in Europe and solemnly affirmed religious liberty – a positive

form of the tolerance the Carrolls had celebrated. The Decree on Religious Liberty coincides with and marks the shift of European American Catholics from a faith primarily inherited from generations of immigrants to a faith known in the midst of pluralism as personally embraced. The conditions for an evangelical form of Catholicism were now in place.

**Catholics and the Dynamics of Pluralism (1968-present)** – Though they could be porous, the immigrant Catholic subculture had clear boundaries. The authentic theology of Vatican II tended to blur those boundaries in three important areas: 1) between Christians and members of the faith traditions of the world, 2) between Catholics and those now recognized as “separated” fellow Christians, 3) between clergy and religious and laity. The full effects of voluntarism and pluralism began to kick in. What it meant to be a Catholic was not as clear as it used to be. We started to worry about “Catholic identity.”

As American Catholics moved up the sociological escalator, their subculture was dissolving into a landscape of choice. What we now call the identity and mission of its remaining institutions need to be renegotiated for a voluntary demographic. At the same time that period of singular social and political turbulence known as the “1960s” was underway. Between 1968 and 1979, I studied graduate theology. It was an exhilarating time, but also uniquely unsettled time. Many of my peers not only left the field, they also left the church. Confusion extended to the highest levels. The Temptations called the whole thing a “Ball of Confusion.”

Enter Pope John Paul II. Say what you will about him. There is much to say. Here’s a start. “The redeemer of humanity, Jesus Christ, is the center of the universe of history.” This was the first line of his first encyclical in 1979. In the midst of the ball of confusion, he reaffirmed the centrality of Christ. For the sake of the church’s mission to the world, and to the consternation of many, he stabilized its internal boundaries and redrew them around a Christological center. At a time when many still expected fully formed Catholics to keep sliding down the subculture’s educational chutes, he knew that living churches must evangelize or die. Anxiety about identity did not paralyze him. Instead he became the world’s

premier evangelist. He introduced the “new evangelization” and wrote much on it, but nothing better than Pope Paul VI’s 1975 Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. If the phrase “new evangelization” is confusing, read *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

As contemporary U.S. Catholics face the challenge of how to be Catholic without a subculture, they must attend to evangelization and formation. For better or worse, the subculture did much of the work of forming Catholics and handing on the faith. Now young people rarely experience the givenness of Catholicism as an inheritance that surrounds them. In the dynamics of pluralism, they must receive it as something they personally embrace. In an overstocked religious marketplace, we can be confident that many young people will be initially attracted to Catholicism. The church has to offer them formation in Catholic patterns of worship, community, and service. That’s why all the talk about evangelization. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* identifies Christ himself as the Good News and the first Herald of the Gospel. It calls evangelization the “Church’s specific grace and calling and the activity most expressive of her real nature. The Church exists in order to evangelize.” (para. 14)

**Demography: Here Come the Nones** – The most striking demographic trend in religious America is what Robert Putnam and David Campbell have called the “rise of the nones.”<sup>4</sup> The nones or the religiously unaffiliated first came to national attention with the widely-publicized 2008 Pew Forum “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey.”<sup>5</sup> Beneath the seemingly calm surface of American religion – 50% Protestant, 25% Catholic, 25% other – the survey found significant instability in a notable trend to disaffiliation. In fact, the unaffiliated appeared as the fastest growing “religious” group in the country. In 2008 the U.S. was barely hanging on as a Protestant nation at about 51%. 28% of Americans had left the faith of their birth. If we include movement among Protestant bodies, the per cent jumps to 44%. Most striking in 2008, however, was that 16.1% of Americans reported no religious affiliation. By 2012, the Protestant majority had disappeared and the nones had risen to nearly 20%.<sup>6</sup> The trend to

disaffiliation is especially strong among millennials or young people between ages 17 and 30. According to Putnam and Campbell in 2011, “a third of Americans in their early 20s were without religion.”<sup>7</sup>

The 2008 Pew Forum survey confirms that the face of Catholicism in the U.S. has changed dramatically over the previous forty years since the 1960s. We are once again a church of immigrants. Of the estimated 75 million American Catholics in 2010, many were descended from the European immigrants who came to the U.S. between 1820 and 1920. But this well assimilated population is aging. In addition, one third of those raised Catholic have left the church, making one in ten Americans in 2008 a former Catholic. And yet, over the past forty years, the percentage of Catholics in the U.S. population has remained stable at about 25%. Only 2.6% of Americans in 2008 were converts to Catholicism. African American, Asian, and American Indian Catholics together make up about 5% of the Catholic population.<sup>8</sup> Making up for the loss of European American members through death and disaffiliation are new immigrants from places such as Mexico, Central and South America, Vietnam, African countries, and the Philippines. They tend to live in the West/Southwest rather than the Northeast and Midwest. By 2012 more than half (52%) of all immigrants to the U.S. were Catholic and 30% of Catholics were born outside the U.S.<sup>9</sup> Three quarters of these immigrants are from Latin America and the Caribbean. The future of Catholicism in the U.S. has a Latino/a look. While one in three Catholics were Hispanic in 2008, nearly half or 45% of Catholics between 18 and 29 identified themselves as Hispanic in 2011.

In 2011 the *National Catholic Reporter* published the most recent installment of its five-year surveys of American Catholics begun in 1987.<sup>10</sup> Both text and title, “Persistence and Change,” of the 28-page digest of the survey results, emphasize the stability of American Catholics over the twenty-five year history of the survey. This looks like a push back against the Pew Forum results of 2008 which emphasized fluidity. For example, the text emphasizes the stability of “highly committed” Catholics over the twenty-five years. But the numbers show that between 1987 and 2011, the “highly committed”



decreased from 27% to 19% (14a). Among 18 to 29 year olds or millennials, the number of “highly committed” is only 16% (14a).<sup>11</sup>

Two of the most striking new aspects of the 2011 poll are the comparisons of “Hispanics” and “Others” among millennials, and the inclusion of questions on “important reasons” why young people report that they do or do not go to weekly Mass. Mass attendance actually rose among millennials from 15% in 2005 to 23% in 2011. But this turns out to be a mixed blessing when we consider that this 8% increase “may be attributed to the fact that 26% of Hispanic millennials said they go to Mass every week, compared to 20% of non-Hispanic millennials” (6a).

Millennials have the lowest reported Mass attendance of all the generations. The survey rightly emphasizes the economic struggles of new Hispanic immigrants in this population. But the data also show that significantly greater levels of Hispanic religious commitment raise the overall religious profile of the millennial generation and mask the effects of the trend toward disaffiliation on the 55% of millennials who are non-Hispanic. This masking effect comes into clearer focus when we look at the reasons respondents cite for not going to weekly Mass. “I’m just not a religious person” is cited as an important reason by 40% of Catholics across generations. Only 29% of millennials cite this reason with “family responsibilities” understandably leading the way at 48%. But 42% of non-Hispanic millennials cite “I’m just not a religious person” as their most important reason for not going to weekly Mass (24a). Factor out the infusion of religious commitment from the 45% of millennials who are Hispanic, and it is clear that the trend toward disaffiliation has eaten deeply into the youngest generation of European American Catholics.<sup>12</sup> Nor is it clear that future generations of Hispanic Catholics will resist the trend to disaffiliation any more effectively than their European American predecessors have.

**Evangelical Catholics** – The national trend toward religious disaffiliation has had a significant impact on the generation of Catholic millennials. But there is more. Among the 16 to 20 million Catholics at Mass on a given Sunday in the U.S., are the 16% of “highly committed” millennials identified

by the 2011 *NCR* survey. Buried without comment in the data tables of this survey are 25% of non-Hispanic millennials who find the “the Papacy” as “very meaningful” (even when pollsters describe it as “a feature of the institutional church”) and who report “devotions such as Eucharistic adoration and the rosary” as “very important” to their identity as Catholics. These numbers do not surprise me. Such responses look like they come from “evangelical Catholics.” But we won’t know for sure until sociologists decide that these religious outliers are important enough to study.<sup>13</sup> The 2011 research team is clearly not interested in them.

In his 2009 book *The Future of the Church*, John Allen identifies “Evangelical Catholicism” as the second of ten trends he thinks are revolutionizing the world-wide Catholic Church. He is careful not to rank the trends, but he does list “Evangelical Catholicism” second and makes extensive interpretive use of it. He describes the evangelical Catholic impulse as in part a “thrust toward revival of traditional markers of Catholic thought, speech, and practice ...” If it has a “conservative feel,” he cautions that “evangelical Catholicism is every bit as creative a response to modernity as liberal Catholicism.”<sup>14</sup> Evangelical Catholics are young people whose high commitment to the church comes through the voluntary dynamics of pluralism. Their occupational hazards are religious consumerism and individualism. They need to be more deeply formed as Catholics, ideally by people who have lived long and wisely in the faith. Evangelical Catholics are relatively few but ubiquitous. From their ranks come many, if not most, undergraduate theology majors, parish youth ministers, and graduate students in theology and ministry. Though they lie outside the trends sociologists study, they are disproportionately significant for the future of the Church. More than their fellow millennials who are trending toward disaffiliation, they are potential leaders and change agents in the Church.

**Interpretating Disaffiliation** – What are we to make of this strong trend to disaffiliation among college-age Catholics and the simultaneous presence of a small but significant number of what one commentator has called intentional or “distilled Catholics”?<sup>15</sup> In *American Grace* (2010), Putnam and

Campbell interpret the “nones” politically in terms of what they call a “Shock and Two After-Shocks” that rocked religious America. The shock of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” in the 1960s was followed by the rise of religious conservatism in the in the 1980s. This was the first after-shock. The second, “youth disaffection from religion” began in the 1990s.

Putnam and Campbell argue that young people tend strongly to identify religion and “conservatism” in its “theological, social, moral, and political forms.” They cite Barna Research data that identify four words (actually five) with which young Americans tend to associate “religion.” Church leaders and educators would do well to pay close attention to these words: “judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political.” In generational terms, since 2000, “cohorts of whom barely 5% say they have no religious affiliation are being replaced by cohorts of whom roughly 25% say they have no religion, massively increasing the nationwide incidence of nones.”<sup>16</sup>

Putnam’s and Campbell’s emphasis on the political aspect of disaffiliation can be overstated. Broad cultural attitudes, economics, and gender are also involved. Trust in social institutions is declining across the board among the young. In terms of trust, government and big business fare less well than churches. Only the military is faring well. The massive shifts in religious affiliation (44% in 2008) combined with the trend to disaffiliation and the fact that only 6% of the unaffiliated identify as atheists and agnostics indicate a “relative decline of institutional religion.” The denominational differences among churches appear to be increasingly meaningless. This could be seen as a “decline of belonging in general.”<sup>17</sup>

Putnam and Campbell observe that “religious polarization has increasingly aligned Americans’ religious affiliation with their political inclinations.”<sup>18</sup> It is true that 70% of nones voted Democratic in 2012. Nones make up 24% of the Democratic Party.<sup>19</sup> Putnam and Campbell may be correct, but the 2011 “Catholics in America” survey shows there is also a striking alignment between party affiliation and income level. (See Table 15 at 25a) It is well-known that marriage also correlates well with income

level. Nones are disproportionately young unmarried white men. Perhaps there is an important economic component in the rise of the nones to which American analysts would be typically blind and to which church leaders and educators would do well to pay attention and explore further. 40% of those raised unaffiliated backslide into some form of religious affiliation. It would be interesting to investigate the possible economic aspects of this phenomenon and its connection to decline of belonging.

The reference to young unmarried white men draws attention to the strikingly gendered character of disaffiliation among millennial Catholics. Two times the number of Catholic women as men are currently members of religious communities. Across generations, women are less likely to be nones by 19 to 12%. But among Catholic millennials, women are slightly more inclined than men not to attend Mass. Though Protestant women do move among denominations, there is no similar decline in church attendance among them. This is a uniquely Catholic phenomenon. Given the traditional role of women in passing on the faith and the fact that 80% of lay ecclesial ministers in the church are women, the gendered nature of disaffiliation among millennial Catholics is ominous.<sup>20</sup>

What has been said so far suggests that the trend to disaffiliation among millennials is complex, subject to analysis from a variety of perspectives, and perhaps not as “hard” as it might at first appear. A recent “Millennial Values Survey” tends to confirm this suspicion. 76% of college-age millennials in 2012 agreed that modern day Christianity had good values and principles. 63% agree that it consistently shows love for other people.<sup>21</sup> But then there is the strong anti-institutional bias among millennials and the four words, *homophobic* and *judgmental* conspicuous among them. 59% of college age millennials support gay marriage and only 37% oppose it. But 44% think it is wrong and only 48% think it’s morally acceptable. 64% of college age millennials perceive churches as anti-gay and 62% perceive them as judgmental. Among Christian affiliated college age millennials 58% perceive the churches as anti-gay. For the disaffiliated, the figure is 79%. The terms *anti-gay* and *judgmental* suggest that when college-age millennials think about the issue of gay marriage, they are not thinking ideologically in abstract

notional terms of religious liberty, the definition of marriage, or the created nature of human sexuality. Rather they are thinking of the specific gay people they know, relatives and friends perhaps, and their desire to be treated as ordinary human beings.

Putnam and Campbell warn that it would be unwise to think of the nones in ideological terms as “a symptom of ineluctable secularization.”<sup>22</sup> The trend to disaffiliation is real, but in a hyper-pluralistic environment with a decline of belonging in general, it is not unique to churches. In a culture of choice, whether it is a political party, a product, or a basketball team, we know we have to scramble to keep our market share, our niche, or whatever we call it. Everyone must, in a sense, evangelize or die. It sounds crass, but Putnam and Campbell put it this way: “In a religious cafeteria in which rapidly growing numbers of young Americans are manifestly unhappy with a menu that is too political or hypocritical for their taste, religious entrepreneurs have a powerful incentive to concoct more palatable offerings. To these entrepreneurs the rapidly proliferating nones are an underserved niche, or in more appropriate language, souls to be saved.”<sup>23</sup>

**Pastoral and Theological Reflections** – The chief pastoral challenge the Church in the U.S. faces is how to hand on the faith to the next generations of young Catholics trending toward disaffiliation and who are inclined to describe religious institutions as “judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political.” A temporary European American Catholic majority has the task of responding in a positive way to the new immigrants among us, and especially to the increasing Latino/a face of a church normed in the past by east-coast and mid-west immigrant Catholics of a distinctively Irish cast.

We can no longer assume that “Catholics” refers to a recognizable group who share an identity as a people. The human side of the Church reflects the hyper-pluralism and consumerism of our wider culture. Church often looks like it aligns with our economic and political divisions. We have differences of sensibility in worship, theology, and spiritual practices, some legitimate, some not. Even in the Roman liturgy itself, we now have a choice between ordinary and extraordinary forms. We have Vatican

II Catholics and John Paul II Catholics. Among the younger generation, we have millennials who are self-described “just not very religious” people alongside on-fire evangelical Catholics. In our institutions, we struggle, sometimes clumsily, to draw boundaries and articulate a truly Catholic shape. Pastors have the challenge of holding it all together in something like the catholicity of the Creed.

Catholicism is at a distinct disadvantage on the contemporary religious landscape. It is an historically given culture on an intentional landscape where people tend to view culture as self-constructed. It’s a sacramental church in a culture that has ever diminishing trust in institutions and rites unless they belong to the military. You can’t have Catholicism and its culture without priests. But we have an aging, diminishing, overworked clergy with Vatican II priests and John Paul II priests. We have lay ecclesial ministers and permanent deacons, but no ordained women deacons.

In an anti-institutional environment, the church as a visible public organization is in trouble. As I heard one bishop put it, the early church’s Christological controversies about the relation of humanity and divinity in Jesus have migrated to ecclesiology. The human side of the church threatens to overwhelm and obscure the divine side from view. American Catholics don’t appear to give the church a lot of thought. When they do think about it, the scandal of clergy sexual abuse is the first thing that comes to mind. Around the time Pope Benedict resigned in March, researchers asked a small sample of Catholics (184) to say in their own words what they thought was the most important problem facing the church. 34% of the sample made some reference to the scandal. No other response was higher than 9%.<sup>24</sup> According to the 2011 *NCR* survey, 83% of Catholics across the generations believe that the issue of sexual abuse of young people by priests hurts the credibility of church leaders when they speak out on political or social issues. 77% across generations agree that this issue has hurt the ability of priests to meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of their people (Table 4, 17a). These are serious numbers<sup>25</sup>. At the same time, Catholics have recently expressed high satisfaction with the general job the bishops are doing.

It is not clear that Americans in general give churches much thought. Recently my family attended a production of the musical “Sister Act” in the southern city of Durham, North Carolina. The next morning we went to a Methodist Eucharist in the faux gothic of Duke Chapel. The presider was a woman, the guest preacher was a Catholic. At the end of “Sister Act,” the full crowd at the Durham Performing Arts Center gave the cast a long standing ovation. The liturgy in Duke Chapel was conducted reverently and solemnly in keeping with the traditional rites of the church going back into the first millennium, including the words of institution and communion under both kinds. The woman in front of us made a thanksgiving after communion as devout as any I’ve ever seen in a Catholic church. Ever since I have been pondering the question of what the people at the play and in the chapel were seeing on the stage and at the altar.

Talk of religious illiteracy presumes some cultural standard of religious literacy that illiterates fail to meet. We don’t seem to have such a standard. Most Americans, especially the young, simply do not know or do not care what the Reformation was about. The substantive theological differences among the various post-Reformation churches in the west, if they matter at all, are no longer decisive. The fact that 44% of Americans in 2008 changed religious affiliation indicates strongly that denominations in themselves don’t matter much and we are in fact in a post-denominational society.

Catholicism has historically been a culture. Cultures have shared embodied practices and material symbols that shape their boundaries. But free from post-Reformation identification with papist superstition, Catholic practices and material symbols, detachable now from the cultural matrix in which they make sense and floating free in the mix, are at least as exotic as Hindu gods and Buddhist practices. What’s more they can signify the vague good values and principles, the love for other people, that even disaffiliating millennials associate with Christianity. This only works, I suspect, because our culture at least temporarily remains Christian in origin but not in consequence.

It would be foolish not to reckon with the trend to religious disaffiliation and the related issues raised here. But in the end, like bills and tax returns, cluttered inboxes and Facebook walls, they are as ephemeral as the psalmist's grass and flowers. If Catholicism is no longer a working culture, we are thrown back on the one thing necessary, the one thing that matters. Only one thing lasts, and that is Jesus Christ, the center of the universe and of history.

Earlier, I made reference to the new evangelization, the split between Gospel and culture, and the eloquence with which *Evangelii Nuntiandi* describes evangelization. It begins with Christ, the content of the Gospel, and salvation in him. If disaffiliating millennials are not interested in Christ's salvation, we will have to show them what it is. Telling them will not cut it. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* goes on to say that "in the Church the witness given by a truly Christian life lived in close communion with God and fervent dedication to neighbor must be regarded as the basic means of evangelization ..." In a teeming post-denominational religious marketplace, "people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, or, if they listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (para. 40)

*Evangelii Nuntiandi* concludes with a ringing exhortation to authentic witness: "The world shows countless signs that it rejects God, and yet, despite what many think, the world is also looking for God in unexpected ways and feels a deep need of God. The world is looking for preachers of the Gospel who will to speak to it of a God they themselves know, a God who is close to them, as though they saw the invisible one (Heb: 11-27). The world wants and expects from us simplicity of life, prayerfulness, love for all, especially the lowly and the poor, obedience and humility, self-forgetfulness and renunciation. If we lack this holiness, only with difficulty will our words reach the hearts of modern men and women; they will risk being empty and fruitless." Pope Francis could have written this.

Perhaps we trust the rites and institutions of the military because we know that, over the past decade of war, soldiers have repeatedly staked their lives on them. We all know that martyr means witness. The Church can only evangelize a disaffiliating generation through the holy witness of its



people. Whether it be Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day, people recognize holy witness when they see it. What they don't see or recognize are the culturally embedded practices of daily life such as the Eucharist that mediate the life of Jesus to people like Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa. When Nicholas Kristof was writing his recent columns from Africa, he was rightly taken by the witness of the religious sisters he met there and took a certain delight in contrasting them with bishops and the "institutional church." Every time I finished one of these columns, I wished I could ask Nicholas Kristof where he thought these holy women came from and if he realized how they were formed by the practices of religious life in the church to be the people he admired.

#### **Concluding Thoughts –**

1. In a post-denominational situation of deep pluralism, the church's presence has to be primarily evangelical and Christ-centered. Catholicism will always be a culture, but its culture must now be streamlined in the interest of forming holy witnesses. The boundaries might not be as sharp and clear as they were in an ecclesial atmosphere of post-Reformation controversy and over-specified confessional identities. Without the off putting tone and partisan political agenda, I want to affirm George Weigel's plea in *Evangelical Catholicism* that institutional maintenance not overshadow the church's mission. Evangelical witness in the world must take precedence over institutional maintenance.
2. In such a church, it will be harder to be a liberal Catholic with a primary agenda of large-scale internal church reform on the model of Vatican II (see note 24 above). The boundaries reformers are accustomed to push against are no longer as clear and secure as they might have been in a Catholic subculture. Internal reform will happen but it will be more modest in the direction of clean up and simplicity. The tribe of liberal Catholics, at least if they are primarily advocates of institutional maintenance as internal church reform on a big scale, will likely grow smaller.

3. Those who perceive the boundaries most clearly, e.g., evangelical Catholics and especially converts to Catholicism who have theologically worked their way through post-Reformation controversy and concluded that the Catholics had the better of it, will be fearful of violating the boundaries and tempted to defend them stridently. This would be a mistake and draw attention away from the compassionate witness of “simplicity of life, prayerfulness, love for all, especially the lowly and the poor, obedience and humility, self-forgetfulness and renunciation” called for by *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.
4. The presence of Hispanic Catholic immigrants from more traditionally oriented cultures is a game changer that simply must be taken into account. The Latino/a presence has allowed researchers to pass over the deep changes among European American Catholics, especially among millennials. These two internally diverse populations require the church to work out different sets of pastoral responses.
5. Americanism is over. The belief that there is a providential fit between the political institutions of the United States and the Catholic natural law tradition, is a remnant of an earlier immigrant church. If John Courtney Murray were writing now, he would have to end *We Hold These Truths* with the penultimate chapter entitled “The Doctrine is Dead.” How could he possibly write the final chapter, “The Doctrine Lives”? Beginning with *Griswold v. Connecticut*, moving on through *Roe v. Wade* to the Supreme Court’s recent overturning of *DOMA*, American jurisprudence has consistently rejected inscribing into law key elements of natural law doctrine as the church has traditionally understood it.<sup>26</sup> Catholics can no longer expect American culture to reflect Catholic natural law principles. The transhuman looms on the horizon. In its laws and shared public culture, if not in the souls of its people, the United States is more like the French Third Republic than Murray’s post-war America. Catholics cannot save the United States. But this is our home and we must shape our practical political judgments as post-Americanism requires. In our

situation, French theologians of the Third Republic, with their emphasis on drawing deeply from the tradition for the present, will become increasingly relevant.

6. “Catholic” cannot be a brand to be policed and protected. In the face of “judgmental, hypocritical, homophobic, and too political,” evangelization based on compassionate witness must be primary, taking precedence over the protection of theological and legal boundaries. Compassionate holy witness comes first, with the shape of life that makes it possible coming later. This was the pattern of the Christians of the first three centuries, a period with uncanny similarities to our own. Even the appearance of cruelty and inhumane behavior to protect the brand cannot be a way to advance the cause of the Gospel. In his conduct to date, Pope Francis offers a parable about how compassionate witness looks.

**Evangelization and Theology** –In post-denominational pluralism, the distinction between teaching theology and evangelization can be overstated. In teaching other faith traditions, we regularly take care to present Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam as lived religious paths and not simply lists of exotic beliefs. We are concerned to show how the Buddha functions for his Mahayana devout, Síva for his faithful, or the prophet Muhammad for the straight path of Islam. In Newman’s terms, we want students to have both notional (intellectual) and real (in terms of imagination and affections) apprehensions of these traditions.

In a post-denominational society with fading Protestant and Catholic cultural residues, Christianity itself, always complicated depending on the strength of its residual cultural effects, is as potentially alien and exotic to our students as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam. Sympathetic notional and real accounts of how Jesus works in Christian living have the same epistemological status as the examples in the previous paragraph. Given the prevailing distrust of institutions among the young and the concomitant incomprehensibility of denominational difference, we are thrown back on holy witnesses to introduce theology and make clear the difference Jesus actually makes in peoples’ lives. Saints and witnesses

convey that Christianity is more than beliefs and rules and raise questions about the shape of a life, formed in part by rules and beliefs, that makes holiness possible.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay began as the first Annual Bishop Simon Bruté Lecture at Marian University, Indianapolis on March 22, 2012. It developed in presentations to the Ohio State Seminar for Diocesan Staffs of Religious Education in April 2012 and to the Columbus Diocesan Association of Religious Educators in March 2013. I am grateful to the participants in all of these programs.

<sup>2</sup> James Hennessey, S.J., *American Catholics, A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 59, 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>4</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace, How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), Chapter 4.

<sup>5</sup> <http://religions.pewforum/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf> for the full report.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Gerson, "The American Loss of Faith," *Washington Post*, March 26, 2013, A21 and "Polarized by Religion," *Washington Post*, March 29, 2013, A15. These two columns are based on a presentation by Luis Lugo of the Pew Forum on recent changes in American religion since the 2008 survey.

<sup>7</sup> Putnam and Campbell, "God and Caesar in America, Why Mixing Religion and Politics is Bad for Both," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, 2012: 34-43, at 41.

<sup>8</sup> See the 2011 National Black Catholic Survey, National Black Catholic Congress, Inc. Compared with 31% of white Catholics, 48.2% of African American Catholics report they attend Mass weekly.

<http://www.thecatholictelegraph.com/black-catholics-survey-finds-strong-ties-strong-engagement-in-church/5001>.

<sup>9</sup> The Global Catholic Population at <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Catholic/The-Global-Catholic-Population.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> "Catholics in America, Persistence and Change," special insert in the *National Catholic Reporter*, October 28-November 10, 2012, 1a-28a, hereafter cited in the text. The survey, with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5, was conducted online with a sample of 1,442 self-identified Catholics. 56% of the Hispanic part of the sample responded in Spanish. The Pew Forum survey of 2008 was conducted by interview and based on a sample of 35,000 Americans.

<sup>11</sup> Based on analysis of the General Social Survey, Pew reported that in 2012 strong Catholic identity was at the lowest it had ever been in the four decades of the GSS. Only 27% of Catholics called themselves "strong." When the General Social Survey began in 1974, 47% of Catholics reported weekly Mass attendance. In 2012, it was only 24%. In 1974, 85% of "strong" Catholics reported weekly Mass attendance. In 2012, it was down to 53%. "Highly committed" and "strong" are no doubt based on responses to different sets of questions, but the downward trend in commitment seems clear. <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Catholic/Strong-Catholic-Identity-at-a-Four-Decade-Low-in-US.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> The 2011 research team, led by William D'Antonio, is at pains to avoid this conclusion in favor of a stable picture of American Catholics. For example, based on comparable numbers of Hispanics and non-Hispanics who agree that Catholics can disagree with aspects of church teaching and still remain loyal to the church. Michelle Dillon suggests that "the growing presence of Hispanic Catholics is unlikely to alter American's Catholicism's rich blend of theological substance, doctrinal autonomy, and institutional loyalty" (12a). As Dillon shows, the data bear this interpretation – which could also serve as a description of the research team – but it is hard to avoid concluding that the team tends to downplay aspects of the data that point in the direction of instability and disaffiliation.

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<sup>13</sup> On evangelical Catholics, see William L. Portier, "In Defense of Mount Saint Mary's," *Commonweal*, 11 February 2000, 31-33; "Here Come the Evangelical Catholics," *Communio, International Catholic Review* 31 (Spring 2004): 35-66; Foreword to William C. Mattison III, ed., *New Wine, New Wineskins, A Next Generation Reflects on Key Issues in Catholic Moral Theology* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), ix-xii; "Rising to the Evangelical Moment," *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 49-57; "More Mission, Less Maintenance," *Commonweal*, April 12, 2013, 29-31. This is a review of George Weigel's *Evangelical Catholicism, Deep Reform in the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Church*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> John L. Allen, Jr., *The Future Church, How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), Chapter 2, 57, 58. Allen draws freely on the ideas in "Here Come the Evangelical Catholics."

<sup>15</sup> Stephen S. Schenk, "My Take: The Myth and Reality of the Catholic Vote," on the CNN Belief Blog, CNN.comBlogs, February 20, 2012. Schenk divides Catholic voters into three groups: Latino Catholics, ethnically and culturally Catholics from the Northeast and Midwest, and what he calls intentional or "distilled" Catholics.

<sup>16</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 120, 121, 123.

<sup>17</sup> Gerson, "The American Loss of Faith," A21 and "Polarized by Religion," A15.

<sup>18</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 132.

<sup>19</sup> Gerson, "Polarized by Religion," A15.

<sup>20</sup> Patricia Wittberg, S.C., "A Lost Generation?" *America*, February 20, 2012, 13-16. Wittberg relies on data from the annual General Social Survey (2002-2008). She discusses possible responses the church could make: "Women could be ordained deaconesses and, with the appropriate change to canon law, could even be appointed cardinals – ideas that have been discussed for decades," at 15. In his *motu proprio "Omnium in Mentem,"* (December 2009), Pope Benedict XVI revised Canons 1008-09 in the 1983 Code of Canon Law to make clear that bishops and priests act *in persona Christi capiti*, while deacons serve the church in liturgy, word, and sacrament. This separates permanent deacons from the clerical state and makes clear that they are not "transitional" deacons. See Gerald O'Collins, "Unlocking the Door," *The Tablet*, 25 May, 2013: 4-5. According to the 2011 NCR survey, "Persistence and Change," 75% of Catholics are in favor of women deacons (9a). Pope Francis has already made known his intention to appoint more women to important posts in the Vatican.

<sup>21</sup> See Public Opinion Research Institute and Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, Georgetown University, "2012 Millennial Values Survey" at <http://publicreligion.org/research/2012/04/millennial-values-survey-2012>.

<sup>22</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 133.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> See <http://pewforum.org> – "Views of the Catholic Church Today." Among the "most important problems," contraception came in at 3%; "priest shortage/priests can't marry/no women priests" was at 2%. 27% of respondents thought the "most important way the Catholic Church helps society today" to be "helps the poor, sick, needy, charitable works." Despite the miniscule sample, these numbers are worth thinking about.

<sup>25</sup> The research team doesn't break out the percentages for hurts credibility "a great deal" and "somewhat" in these responses. Perhaps the 83% total was just too irresistible. Nevertheless, 15% and 22% totals for "only a little" and "not at all" on these respective issues is striking and telling.

<sup>26</sup>