

“This hopeful and honest work urges Catholics to go out and engage the secularized world they live in. Instead of lamenting the loss of past expressions of Catholic culture, Fr. Cameli sets the stage for candid conversations that employ imagination to discover what the baptized can and *ought* to do now. Deeply aware that Jesus’ own Spirit guides them, their union with other committed disciples fosters a boldness that individuals alone cannot sustain. Even seemingly insignificant acts, much like Jesus’ salt and yeast, make God’s kingdom more visible around them. Aware of God showing the way, they can surprise the world with the profound joy that eludes so many in this secular age.”

—Elizabeth Nagel  
Professor of Biblical Studies at Mundelein Seminary  
University of Saint Mary of the Lake

“This book offers remarkable insight into how the somewhat bleak status of the Church of our times can be transformed in the future. Beginning with a fresh and thorough assessment of how the Catholic Church persists in the midst of an increasingly secular environment, Louis Cameli suggests that decline is ‘what we can expect’ from our present situation. This negative assessment leads the author to describe a state of affairs that requires a faith that is ‘intentional, deliberate, and free,’ capable of leading the Church to a renewed future. In a dynamic conclusion, Cameli proposes options that center on the Gospel, the fount and foundation of resourceful evangelization. An invitation to meet modern challenges with modern answers situates the lessons of the Gospel, the life of Christ, as the basis of response to political, economic, environmental, and sexual questions, among others. The ‘Afterword’ by Cardinal Blase Cupich demonstrates how ‘foundational convictions,’ bolstered by the teachings of Pope Francis, can lead to renewal. Ultimately, *Church, Faith, Future* offers hopeful and essential substance for anyone who cares about the Church.”

—Katarina Schuth, OSF  
Endowed Chair for the Social Scientific Study of Religion  
St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity, University of St. Thomas



# Church, Faith, Future

What We Face, What We Can Do

Louis J. Cameli

*Afterword by Cardinal Blase J. Cupich*



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To  
*Augustino Carley,*  
*who brings hope to our future*



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# Preface

## History, Responsibility, and Faith

In a remote and beautiful place, I encountered a terrible story of human cruelty and—in that very same place—a legacy of extraordinary faith-filled compassion. This happened when I visited the settlement of Kalaupapa on the island of Molokai in Hawaii. There, in the nineteenth century, Fr. Damien de Veuster and Sr. Marianne Cope cared for lepers who had been isolated and abandoned by society.

Two sisters who today belong to Sr. Marianne's community led our group to Kalawao Bay on the coast of Molokai. With huge rocks jutting up from the sea, the bay is a place of incomparable beauty. Here, the sisters said, boats from the other islands would release their human cargo into the water before quickly departing. Some of the ailing people were able to swim to shore. Others, weakened by their illness, were unable, and they drowned. According to the sisters, when Fr. Damien saw that a boat was arriving he would run to the bay, go into the water, and help retrieve those who were struggling. He then brought them to a place that became their home and their *ohana* or family.

In Kalawao Bay, history tells us how human cruelty and faith-filled compassion vied with each other. That same history demonstrates how Fr. Damien's legacy of compassion prevailed.

The visit to the Kalaupapa settlement and Kalawao Bay affected me deeply. Certainly, visiting this historic place stirred many emotions in me, but it meant much more than just registering strong feelings. I became freshly aware of Jesus' call to be compassionate. I understood more clearly what Pope Francis means when he urges us "to go to the margins of society." And, very significantly, the faith history contained on this sacred ground gave me a new sense of responsibility. Somehow encountering and coming to know the faith of Fr. Damien

and Sr. Marianne and the many vulnerable people in their care also gave me a sense of responsibility to share—in whatever measure was possible for me—their spirit of faith and compassion in today's world.

All of us who belong to the family of faith have had similar experiences. We encountered the faith of those who have gone before us in one form or another. Their stories not only edified or inspired us, but—even more—they brought us to a clearer sense of responsibility to share that faith now and in the future. And that relationship of history, faith, and responsibility is at the origin of the book you are now reading.

This book began with an earlier retrieval of the story of my ancestral faith. That history is contained in my earlier book, *The Archaeology of Faith: A Personal Exploration of How We Come to Believe*.<sup>1</sup> There, I traced the experiences of faith of my ancestors, experiences that stretched back some twenty-five hundred years. In gathering their experiences of faith into a historical narrative, I understood my personal faith in a new and fresh way. I understood that my faith has its roots in a rich matrix of history and culture and individual lives and commitments. My faith, in other words, is not mine alone. It reaches back and builds on the faith of many, many believers. It also moves forward through history with its own dynamism, as it embraces new generations century by century.

Knowing faith this way, I also recognized my part in the continuing and unfolding history of faith. I have a responsibility for the movement of faith into the future. This is no generic sense of responsibility. Because of the particular circumstances of our historical and cultural moment that I will later describe, I have an *urgent* and *focused* sense of responsibility. It is no exaggeration to say that we stand at a critical juncture that deeply challenges humanity, the church, and faith itself. Pope John XXIII captured this urgency of bringing faith to the world. He stood aware and perplexed in the middle of a century plagued by two world wars, multiple genocides, the development of the weapons of mass destruction, and the growing disparity between those who had much and those who did not even have enough to survive. When

<sup>1</sup> Louis J. Cameli, *The Archaeology of Faith: A Personal Exploration of How We Come to Believe* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2015).

he convoked the Second Vatican Council in 1961, he wrote, "Today the Church is witnessing a crisis under way within society. While humanity is on the edge of a new era, tasks of immense gravity and amplitude await the Church, as in the most tragic periods of its history. It is a question in fact of bringing the modern world into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the gospel."<sup>2</sup>

Together as the church of Jesus Christ, we celebrate a rich heritage of faith. And because of that history of faith, we who form the church and belong to the Body of Christ have great responsibilities to bring faith into the world and into the future. Immediately, however, a question arises. How shall we fulfill our responsibility? It will not happen merely with talk about it or with patchwork programs or with passively waiting for direction from on high. It will only happen when we take responsibility to look honestly and deeply at the challenges that face us today and when we take responsibility to listen attentively to the directions that God is prompting us to follow.

I make no claims to have a clear and complete answer. By no means! My hope is limited and modest. And my hope is to make a beginning. I want to encourage a conversation in which believers will identify what they have noticed about the world they live in. And then, they can also share their discernment of where God is leading his church. The conversation belongs to bishops, priests, deacons, and other recognized ecclesial ministers. The conversation also belongs more widely in the church to so many others who have "the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience."<sup>3</sup>

When that conversation takes place, it will surely spark our imagination and we will begin to see freshly what faith can mean in our circumstances. Our conversation will offer designs for believing today and tomorrow. Even more, our Spirit-guided conversation will strengthen our shared resolve and commitment to do something. And that means nothing less than bringing our faith into the future.

<sup>2</sup> The apostolic constitution *Humanae Salutis* (December 25, 1961), in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 703.

<sup>3</sup> *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) 8. Quotations from Vatican II documents are taken from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).



# Introduction

## An Urgent and Necessary Reflection on Our Future

We have come to expect the unexpected from Pope Francis. Still, many people were astonished when he drew lessons from an English novel published at the beginning of the twentieth century to explain the First Book of Maccabees. The pope cited *Lord of the World* by the convert and priest Robert Hugh Benson.<sup>1</sup>

We have also come to expect a joyous and light demeanor from Pope Francis, and Benson's novel is anything but light and joyous. His book begins with secular currents that had taken root in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He then extrapolates these currents, projects into the future, and offers a dystopian picture of the world and the church. A thoroughly secularized world leads to an entirely reduced church and an eventual apocalyptic confrontation. Readers of *Lord of the World* complained to Benson that his vision for Christianity and the church was altogether too bleak. In response, he wrote another novel, *The Dawn of All*, which also projected into the future but very differently.<sup>2</sup> In *The Dawn of All*, Christianity and, more specifically, Catholicism triumph completely over the ideologies and forces of secularism. Scientism, the conviction that science and scientific method can account for everything, becomes an example of a discarded, quaint, and almost entirely forgotten way of thinking. Meanwhile, Catholic philosophy and theology reign unchallenged. Interestingly, despite a flourishing church and Catholic culture,

<sup>1</sup> Robert Hugh Benson, *Lord of the World* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1907).

<sup>2</sup> Benson, *The Dawn of All* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1911).

repressive and even worldly elements in the church remain and left me uneasy with Benson's alternate vision of the future.

These novels and others like them fascinate me. Of course, part of the fascination rests with their entertainment value, but there is more than entertainment in play. I crave some way of identifying the future, as we all do. More specifically, as a priest and as someone deeply invested in the life of the church, I want to have a sense of where we are going, so that I can contribute to shaping the future of the church, which serves the coming of the reign of God.

Predictably, someone might quickly respond, "Look at the gospels. It's all there. The future is given and so is the program." In turn, I would say that it is not quite so simple, because the gospels are not one-dimensional in describing the future. We have, for example, Jesus' reassuring words of ultimate victory in John's gospel: "In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33). At the same time, we find these sobering words of Jesus in Luke's gospel: "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8). The gospels are utterly insistent on the primacy of God's unfailing grace, and they are equally insistent on human freedom, which may or may not embrace that grace. The future belongs to God, and there is no doubt about that. The future is also shaped by human responses, and there is much to doubt about that.

Identifying future trends for church and society and then developing pastoral responses to them is not a speculative exercise without practical consequence. In fact, the opposite is true. Looking into the future, as best as we can, and planning, again as best as we can, for that future is an especially urgent and practical task. Perhaps I can illustrate this from my own experience as a pastor.

I was the pastor of a parish with about twelve hundred registered households. The parish was fifty years old, very stable, and situated in a solidly middle-class outer ring of the city. Seniors were by far the largest percentage of active parishioners. I often joked that the cut-off age for our youth group was seventy-five.

During my tenure, I was able to mobilize parishioners to get the parish out of a \$200,000 debt incurred after all savings had been spent down trying to maintain a school that finally closed with an enrollment of eighty-eight students representing twenty parish fami-

lies. Ongoing financial support enabled us to meet our budget, but there were no margins for expanding staff or services. It was always a struggle.

Because of the number of seniors, the parish celebrated a large number of funerals and few baptisms and fewer marriages. Parishioners who died were not replaced by others. The parish seemed to shrink a bit each year. The shrinkage stood in sharp contrast to the time of the parish's establishment fifty years before, when a burgeoning Catholic population of young families filled the pews and the school. In fact, at that time other parishes also rose in the neighborhood, so that a mile and a half in every direction from my parish was another Catholic church.

Changed demographics, limited financial resources, and aging infrastructure—all these posed real and significant challenges for me, the pastor who had responsibility for guiding and sustaining the community. And yet, these challenges were by far secondary to another, deeper, and much more pressing challenge that I faced on a daily basis. I felt stymied and unprepared when I regularly encountered a bewildering range of people who made claims on the parish and on me but whose faith varied from deep to superficial to seemingly nonexistent. This was a complicated situation, and I will try to explain it as best as I can.

Overall, my parishioners were not theologically sophisticated people, but many of them—the core of the parish—were very devout, committed, and holy. They might not have been able to articulate their faith, but they lived it in such a way that they challenged me to follow Jesus more closely and more generously. For that, I shall be forever grateful. There were also other basically good people who were parishioners, but for them the parish was not first and foremost a community of faith. Rather, the parish was part of their social framework. Their participation seemed not so much rooted in convictions of faith as in the need for a stable community. Consequently, their participation in the faith and worship life of the community was often quite limited. And these parishioners mightily resisted any change that would upset their routines. A third and final group of people had little, if anything, to do with the parish. They came to request a religious service, perhaps a baptism or a funeral or a house blessing.

They seemed to be poorly catechized or even plainly uncatechized. Frequently, they had their own ideas for embellishing the church's rituals. They evinced no desire to connect with the ongoing life of the church through worship and community participation. They were focused on their specific requests, usually determined to have it their way, and generally belligerent and even hostile when challenged or invited to consider things in a different way.

Sometimes I would step back and survey the situation in the parish. I did not have a single community but multiple populations more or less connected to the faith that I was to serve in their lives. I was the one priest in the parish. And the parish itself had limited staff and financial resources. I asked myself, "Where is this going? And what am I supposed to do?" Embedded in those questions was the larger question about the future. I remember telling a priest friend, "It can't be business as usual." I meant that if we carried on, as we always had, we would spend ourselves down in money, in other resources, and in personal and spiritual energy. And, in the end, all we would have for this investment was a dismal result. No people would be around, even to turn off the lights.

The questions and the dilemmas that I faced in the parish obviously do not tell the whole story of the church. My parish was like a subatomic particle in the larger universe of the church. There are vibrant parishes with younger parishioners, for example, in the Hispanic community. And there is plenty of growth for the church in certain parts of the United States and in other parts of the world. Still, I would submit that my parish reflected many challenges that all of us face in the church in North America as we move into the future.

Although there is a wide array of parish renewal programs designed to revitalize local communities of faith, larger questions about the church's future and adequate responses to that future remain. The church's future is inextricably wound together with an ever more complex cultural and world situation. So, if we have an eye on the church's future, we also need to have an eye on the world we inhabit and the culture that gives us our context.

How can we move forward? In these reflections, I propose a number of steps that correspond to four questions. My primary focus is on the church but, as I just noted, with needed and adequate atten-

tion paid to the world and its culture. Then, the first question is, *What can we expect?* What can we expect the church to look like in a future world that is already beginning to take shape? We can draw from empirical studies, for example, sociological investigations. We can also draw from history and philosophy. We do have available data from which we can extrapolate into the future. We can identify reasonable expectations of our future and the future of the church.

The second question is a bit of a paradox, but it is very important: *Is there anything unexpected that we could possibly expect?* I mean that history teaches us that there can be surprising turns, unpredicted events, and unanticipated directions. Can we identify—just for our own reference—anything that *might* surprise us as we anticipate the future? Is there anything that might cause us to alter our projections of the future?

Once we have a sense of what to expect and what could surprise us, we will move to a third and more practical question: *What can we do?* How can we go forward now and effectively anticipate the future? What renewal and what new directions for the church will enable us to be the church that God wants us to be and that the world needs? In other words, we need to determine what options are available to us for our response to the future.

The fourth and final question invites us to make a choice. There are probably many things we *can* do but we need to pursue a final practical question: *What ought we to do?* How can we take advantage of the best possibilities for our response and our action? There may be many possibilities for what we can do, but we are finite creatures working in a limited universe. If we want to move forward effectively and well, we will narrow down our choices, discern the best option, and make a decision. Here, with the help of Cardinal Blase Cupich, we will consider the directions taken by a particular local church that is deciding how to embrace the future.

These four questions, then, give structure and direction to these reflections:

What can we expect?

Is there anything unexpected that we could possibly expect?

What can we do?

What *ought* we to do?

# 1

## What Can We Expect?

No one can predict the future with pinpoint accuracy. Still, there are ways to read our history and our current situation to detect clues about what may lie ahead for us. And I will employ a modest method, as I explore the first question: What can we expect? What can we expect for the church whose life is intertwined with the world and the cultures in which it lives and moves?

I will use three different kinds of resources. The first is historical-philosophical reflection, and for that I will draw on Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age*.<sup>1</sup> Taylor helps us to understand how a secular or this-worldly worldview has developed across the last five centuries and shaped the culture in which we currently live. The historical-philosophical dynamics continue today and so give us some sense of where we are headed.

A second resource crosses over into cultural and political analysis. Here, I draw on James Davison Hunter's study *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*.<sup>2</sup> In a cover blurb, Robert Bellah accurately describes Hunter's scope as an "analysis of culture and the capacity of Christians to influence it (or not)." This analysis reveals how Christians and the church navigate today's world and how they will navigate tomorrow's world.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

A final set of resources comes from sociological studies. I use Robert Putnam and David Campbell's *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* to survey today's religious landscape in the United States.<sup>3</sup> A more targeted sociological study, Christian Smith's *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out Of, and Gone from the Church*, helps us draw a line from today into the future with our attention specifically focused on the Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup>

With these three different kinds of resources, we can connect the dots. And if we do, we arrive at a very sobering picture of the future of the church, which, of course, necessarily retains its perennial and foundational features. The church will, however, live out its identity and mission in a way that differs significantly from the way that many of us experienced earlier in our lives.

A natural question flows from this projected portrait or assessment: What shall we do? How shall we care for the church? How shall we care for people both within and without the church, as we enter the future? Those questions will occupy us in another part of our reflections. First, we need to know where we are, and then we can begin to anticipate the future.

### **We Live in a Secular Age Now; Can We Expect a Secular Age in Our Future?**

Charles Taylor meticulously examines four centuries that culminate in our own secular age. At the beginning of his study, *A Secular Age*, he identifies the salient fact of contemporary secularism: "for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option."<sup>5</sup> In other words, there is no need to turn to God via religion or faith to complete what might be missing from our lives. Carefully, he notes that not everyone in this secular age has embraced this purely self-sufficient humanism. It does remain, however, as "a widely available option."

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Christian Smith et al., *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out of, and Gone from the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

Another way to understand this fact of secularism is in the question that Taylor raises about faith: "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"<sup>6</sup> Faith in secular context, in other words, unlike earlier epochs, is not automatic, not something into which we are born and then live with until we die.

Across more than eight hundred pages, Taylor explains how we have arrived at this point. A simple summary of his argument is impossible, but some of the major lines of development are important to note. For example, a fundamental trust in the sufficiency of human reason to discover truth means that taking things on faith is no longer necessary to get to reality. And although God is not entirely dismissed in the modern world, it is a particular god who remains. This is the god of Deism, a god who gets things going in the universe and then walks away. The Deist god opens the door to an impersonal universe. Effectively, this means removing God's involvement from the world and shifting attention from what God might do to what human beings, in fact, can do and are doing. In this shift, an enchanted spirit-world full of superstition vanishes and a rational world emerges, one that is amenable to taking human direction. And there are other consequences.

At a large social level, religion is delinked from society. It is no longer a source of social cohesion. In fact, because of the pluralism of beliefs in the modern world—and, one might add, the relativism that seems to be part and parcel of a secular society—tolerance of all convictions, whatever they may be, is the norm. And the only thing not tolerated is intolerance. At a personal level, if you choose to be religious, you can be religious on your own terms, because a secular age is an age of personal authenticity marked by expressive individualism and the supreme value of personal choice.

If we accept Taylor's philosophical-historical assessment of our age as a secular age, what are the implications for understanding possibilities for the life of faith and the church now and in the future? A

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

full and adequate application of Taylor's thought to fostering faith and church life today and in the future is yet to be done, and it certainly is beyond our scope here. Still, there are some important, if limited, practical conclusions that we can draw from *A Secular Age*, conclusions that might have a direct bearing on parish life and ministry.

When we see the history of secularization, especially in the last five hundred years, laid out before our eyes, we must recognize that we are not dealing with a fad or a short-term trend. The long process of secularization has enabled scientific, economic, and political developments. Secularization has enabled human beings to see what they can do and encouraged them to take up their responsibility in the world. That sense of human agency is not going away. It remains universally embedded in some form, even down to the humblest parishioners who lack the conceptual apparatus to explain the sense of possibility and freedom that belongs to them in a secular age. Consequently, believers want their faith to be reasonable, want freedom to make important decisions about their lives, and want to feel ownership for the faith communities to which they belong.

Of course, the larger secular narrative can take a nasty turn and assume a hostile stance toward faith and religious institutions. And this has happened, notably in the twentieth century with certain political movements and philosophical schools. Interestingly, these negative and hostile turns of secularization have not led the church to condemn the process. In fact, authoritative church teaching endorses good and healthy forms of secularization. The Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World embraces a legitimate secularization when it speaks of a "rightful autonomy of earthly affairs." For example, we read,

If by the autonomy of earthly affairs is meant the gradual discovery, exploitation, and ordering of the laws and values of matter and society, then the demand for autonomy is perfectly in order: it is at once the claim of modern man and the desire of the creator. By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws. . . . However, if by the term "autonomy of earthly affairs" is meant that material being does not depend on God and that man can use it as if it had no relation to its creator, then the falsity of such

a claim will be obvious to anyone who believes in God. Without a creator there can be no creature. . . . Once God is forgotten, the creature is lost sight of as well. (*Gaudium et Spes* 36)<sup>7</sup>

So, what can we expect for the future? The historical-philosophical reflections on our secular age speak about our world, a world that will be with us into the future, and about the church that journeys in that world. Secularization represents and will represent the culture that shapes our understanding, our values, and the courses of action that we pursue. The positive aspects of a secular culture include (1) an approach to faith that is deliberate and intentional; (2) a respect for reason that is entirely compatible with faith; and (3) some insurance against the manipulative use of religion for nonreligious purposes, such as the domination and exploitation of other human beings. The shadow side of secularization can also haunt the culture and the church. It takes autonomy—literally, being a law unto oneself—and absolutizes it. The transcendent dimension of existence is unacknowledged or suppressed and not allowed expression. In short, secularization is fundamentally good, although it can also be susceptible to deviations. Finally, secularization sets expectations for people, expectations that spill over into church life and trickle down to parish life and among parishioners who might find the term “secularization” entirely baffling. Without being conceptually aware of secularization, they expect and want what secularization offers, especially a certain autonomy, freedom, and ownership for institutional life.

### **We Believe in Transformation; Will We Change the World?**

Jesus tells his followers, “You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world” (Matt 5:13-14). With those images, he gives

<sup>7</sup> These same themes have been echoed and emphasized more recently by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si* (On Care for Our Common Home; May 24, 2015). So, for example, he writes, “A correct relationship with the created world demands that we not weaken this social dimension of openness to others, much less the transcendent dimension of our openness to the ‘Thou’ of God. Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. Otherwise, it would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb, locking us into a stifling immanence” (119).

his disciples an identity as agents and instruments of change and transformation. Of course, that transformation begins as personal conversion—from sinner to regenerated and forgiven child of God, and from mortal human being subject to death to coheir of eternal life with Christ. Once transformed by word, faith, and sacrament, we become responsible for the transformation of the world, as the world's salt and light. Then, we can describe—accurately but with some dose of theological jargon—the church as the transformational community of the transformed.

Scripture is clear and so is church teaching. The community of believers draws an essential dimension of its identity from its mission to foster the transformation of this world that culminates with Christ's return in glory and the definitive establishment of the reign of God. So the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church says, "The promised and hoped for restoration, therefore, has already begun in Christ. It is carried forward in the sending of the Holy Spirit and through him continues in the Church in which, through our faith, we learn the meaning of our earthly life, while we bring to term, with hope of future good, the task allotted to us in the world by the Father, and so work out our salvation" (*Lumen Gentium* 48).

If we are to move into the future as believers and be who we are supposed to be, then we must be instruments and agents of change and transformation. In the imagination of many of our contemporaries—and this is probably also true for a good segment of believers—the church is a reservoir, a holding place, and an essentially conservative institution. In their minds, the church remains solely focused on the maintenance of doctrines, traditions, and practices rather than on changing the world. That judgment, however, represents a basic distortion of the identity of believers and the church. If the church is to remain true to itself and move into the future, it will do so as an agent and instrument of change. A serious question, however, arises when we survey the contemporary landscape. As we go into the future, can believers gathered in the church really and truly effect change? It is a question of great significance, because it touches on the central identity of believers and the church as salt and light in the world. Or will we be outside the process that actually shapes our lives and our world?

James Davison Hunter takes up this question in his book *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. His book pairs well with Taylor's. The perspective that Hunter brings is cultural, social, and political.

Hunter reviews how our culture is actually shaped and changed. He also reviews how the Christian churches in the United States have largely adopted engagement in politics as the path to change, an engagement that is energized negatively by not liking what they see in the culture and, therefore, wanting "to take the culture back."

Like Charles Taylor's analysis of our secular age, Hunter's complex argument cannot be easily and quickly summarized. We can, however, name some of his important themes and conclusions. He identifies important and dominant motifs that have a direct bearing on how we understand the world and the church that lives in the world. For example, he invites us to revise our common view about culture and change by looking at a fundamental paradox embedded in our life together: "In America today, 86 to 88 percent of the people adhere to some faith commitments. And yet our culture—business culture, law and government, the academic world, popular entertainment—is intensely materialistic and secular. Only occasionally do we hear references to religious transcendence in these realms, and even these are vague, generic, and void of particularity. If culture is the accumulation of values and choices made by individuals on the basis of these values, then how is it that American public culture today is so profoundly secular in its character?"<sup>8</sup>

As Hunter grapples with this question, he demonstrates how, in fact, culture is shaped and changed. Culture, in the first place, is not the product of a democratic process. American culture would look very different, if it were. Cultural shifts depend on places that are strong in cultural production, for example, prestigious intellectual institutions, such as think tanks, elite academic institutions, and publishing houses, as well as high-end purveyors of the arts. Christian presence is found not among the strong culture producers but rather among the weaker ones. Furthermore, contrary to some voices of the Christian right, culture does not shift quickly. There is no turn-

<sup>8</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 19.

around in a generation. Culture finds its shape and transformation across generations. The use of politics to change culture—as some Christians would have it—is doomed to failure, because it does not correspond to the dynamics of cultural change. It does not work, and Hunter does not tire of repeating this conclusion on the basis of historical data that he summons.

Hunter also highlights the contemporary Christian propensity to want to move in a new cultural direction because of *ressentiment*, that French word that captures an aggrieved and injured spirit, perhaps even a sense of being victimized. Practically, this means an inability for Christians to offer constructive, imaginative, and creative alternatives to what the current and dominant culture offers. It is impossible, in effect, to build culture on the negative identity that some Christians assume vis-à-vis the culture. At the same time, Hunter sees the real basis in the historical realities of our time for the Christian sense of injury: “The forces of secularity in contemporary America, within such institutions as higher education, public education, the news media, advertising, and popular entertainment, *are* very powerful and their agenda (deliberately or not) *is* fundamentally at odds with traditional Christian morality and spirituality. Whatever positive contributions one may find in it, much of this secularity *is* a solvent on settled convictions and ways of life. What remains of a traditional culture, therefore, *is* threatened with extinction, and Christian conservatives are right to worry about the effects of this on their descendants.”<sup>9</sup>

Hunter’s hard realism cuts both ways, when he acknowledges the hostile cultural environment that legitimately concerns committed Christians and when he affirms the relative impotence of Christians to reshape or reformulate that cultural environment to be in greater conformity with Christian vision and values. Does he propose a remedy to break through this impasse?

Before we consider Hunter’s response to the split between Christian faith and secular culture as he has come to understand it, we can use his conclusions as a lens to view church life on a local level.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 167.

Where does his analysis leave a parish or a diocese or, for that matter, the Catholic Church in the United States? A particular image comes to my mind. It seems that these different expressions of church are bigger or smaller islands in a vast and dominant secular ocean. The islands are undeniably present in the ocean, but they are odd and eccentric spots of belief and custom. They have none of the presence of continental landmasses that can encounter and challenge the sea. In fact, they seem to be at the mercy of the ocean and always in danger of being swamped and submerged. And this fact is not lost on those who live on the islands. Many—maybe most—of these inhabitants are more shaped by the ocean that surrounds them than the island on which they live. The variance, for example, between “official church teaching” and its lack of acceptance by those who belong to the church has been a steady drumbeat of religious reporting. The reported variance often concerns the moral dimensions of human sexuality, but it is not limited to that. It might also be about economic justice, capital punishment, and even spiritual teaching on restraint in the use of the world’s goods. So, where does this leave us now and into the future?

If we return to Hunter, we find not a remedy to the dilemma of Christians living in a thoroughly secularized world but a simple and straightforward response. His proposal, as I understand it, is for Christians and the Christian church to live out a theology of faithful presence. That means steadfastly maintaining Christian identity and values without compromise. It also means engaging the world “within a dialectic of affirmation and antithesis.”<sup>10</sup> Such engagement means affirming the good that is undeniably present in the world, the same world created good by God. It also means standing antithetically to the world subject to sin and the Fall and becoming a community of resistance, as it works toward the constructive subversion of structures and frameworks that are incompatible with God’s plan and design for humanity.<sup>11</sup>

Underlying Hunter’s sense of the present and the future for Christians is his absolutely correct conviction that we do not bring

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 234–35.

about the kingdom of God. On the contrary, the reign of God is the work of God taking hold of this world and transforming it. Christians in the church have a modest but important, if not decisive, role to play that is captured in Hunter's phrase "faithful presence." Within a range of witness and resistance, believers can foster those conditions that God will use to claim sovereignty in this world.

How, then, can we understand Hunter's way of seeing Christians and the church now and in the future in the context of a secular world? Hunter understands that Christians are in the world but not of the world. This condition or status is described in the well-known *Letter to Diognetus*, which he cites.<sup>12</sup> So, Christians are paradoxically both full-fledged citizens of the world and, simultaneously, aliens. They are at once immersed in the world's life but also detached from it. This has always been the case, and it will continue into the future. In this sense, the current questions surrounding "a secular age" are the perennial questions faced by believers in every generation.

Hunter's response of "faithful witness" suggests that those who offer the witness to the world are, indeed, faithful. They need to be true believers. They will necessarily be convinced, steadfast, and uncompromised. They will belong to a church that is the church of true believers. There is, it would seem, little room for incorporating in the church those who are anything less than real and intentional believers. And, by necessity, those believers are very consciously and deliberately formed in their faith. They know clearly who they are, and they stand out distinctly from the secular backdrop of the world in which they live.

Finally, the engagement of believers in the world is driven by "faithful presence." So, continued engagement does not depend on the success or lack of success of what believers do. In the end, God is the responsible agent for the world's transformation.

Charles Taylor's work gives us a macro-historical and philosophical view of the secular world in which we live now and for the foreseeable future. James Davison Hunter shrinks the picture. He locates Christians and the church in that secular world and identifies their mutual engagement and disengagement. The future church—it

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 284–85.

seems from Hunter's perspective—looks smaller, clearly committed, and far more resistant than pliant to the surrounding secular culture.

### **How Does the Church Look in This Secular Culture and What Will It Look Like in the Future?**

Charles Taylor and James Davison Hunter have provided us with a perspective on secularity. That is the context in which we live and in which the church exists. Their perspective, which is historical, philosophical, and cultural, has yielded a portrait of secularity that is our current context and, most probably, our future context as well. A next question leads us to examine the actual impact of secularity on believers and the church. How, in fact, does living in a secular age shape and affect believers and the church to which they belong? To respond to that question, we need to turn to sociological studies that sift through empirical data to obtain a sounding of the impact of a secular world on believers today and—by extrapolation—into the future.

A first sociological study to consider is by Robert Putnam and David Campbell. They look at the overall state of religion and religious belief in the United States. Their study *American Grace* is especially valuable, because it summarizes a vast quantity of empirical research. It provides a portrait and a sketch of trends for religion and religious faith in the United States.

A summary of trends across denominational lines identifies an overall decline of religious participation that will likely carry into the future. Putnam and Campbell affirm that “independent streams of evidence suggest that Americans have become somewhat less observant religiously over the last half century, mostly because of slight but cumulative declines from generation to generation.”<sup>13</sup> The specific pattern for Catholics in the United States is even starker: “Roughly 60 percent of all Americans today who were raised in America as Catholics are no longer practicing Catholics, half of them having left the church entirely and half remaining nominally Catholic, but

<sup>13</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 79–80.

rarely, if ever, taking any part in the life of the church."<sup>14</sup> This dismal picture of a declining Catholic population must, however, be adjusted to incorporate the influx of Latino immigrants that continues to sustain the Catholic Church in the United States as the single largest denomination in the country. The close affiliation of the Latino community with the Catholic Church, however, may loosen, as it did for other immigrant groups, when ethnic identity and religious identity become unbound from each other.

A final observation from Putnam and Campbell looks at one significant measure of the internal quality of Catholic faith by those who profess to be its adherents, that is, their conformity to what the church teaches: "As a group Latino Catholics consistently adopt a more orthodox perspective than their 'Anglo' co-religionists, although neither group could be characterized as hewing closely to the official teachings of the Catholic Church. In fact, the low percentage of Catholics who endorse orthodox Catholic doctrine is striking."<sup>15</sup>

In general, Putnam and Campbell offer a religious portrait of the United States that highlights a relatively high level of religiosity in a secular environment. That religiosity, however, is quite general and does not translate into consistent patterns of religious participation, for example, in the worship life of the churches. The Catholic community in the United States presents a complex picture. On the one hand, especially in the Anglo community, Catholic participation is in steady decline. The Latino community, on the other hand, boosts the overall number of participants in the church, at least for now. Still, both Anglo and Latino Catholics demonstrate a thin affiliation with their faith, as that faith is proclaimed and held by the church with regard to doctrine, moral choices, and regular participation in the life of worship. For Catholics and for the Catholic Church in the United States the overall portrait is one of loose connections. And these loose connections suggest trends that will carry into the future and probably intensify.

In addition to the Putnam and Campbell study *American Grace* with its general focus on religion in America, we are fortunate to have

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 140–41.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

much more targeted sociological studies of Catholic young people by Christian Smith of the University of Notre Dame and his associates. They have been tracking Catholic teenagers as they become emerging adults in their early twenties as part of the *National Study of Youth and Religion*. The particular studies that have emerged from this longitudinal perspective are extraordinarily valuable for many reasons. They identify, for example, decisive formational experiences that the church should take into account while ministering to young people. For our purposes, Christian Smith's latest study *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out of, and Gone from the Church* (2014) enables us to see the religious development (or its lack) of young people living in a secular age. Because they are young, the trends manifested in their development today suggest important directions in the life of the church tomorrow. Their stories, in other words, can be a bellwether for the church of the future in a secular age.

Again, as with Putnam and Campbell's *American Grace*, Christian Smith's book *Young Catholic America* is not susceptible to a quick summary. He brings together a wealth of statistical data, important distinctions (such as differences in Anglo and Hispanic experience), and compelling narratives drawn from personal interviews with young people who have been involved in the study since they were thirteen years old. For our purposes, I will cite several conclusions from *Young Catholic America* to provide a sketch of challenges that the church will face. In fact, the church itself is challenged by the future that these young believers represent. Three areas are especially noteworthy: (1) Sunday Mass attendance; (2) acceptance of Catholic beliefs and values; (3) general patterns of identification and affiliation as Catholic.

*Sunday Mass attendance.* It is no surprise that a small percentage of Catholic emerging adults (between 10 and 20 percent) attend Sunday Mass regularly. Regular Sunday Mass attendance is an obviously important marker for belonging to and practicing the Catholic faith. Historically, adolescents slipped away from regular participation in Sunday Mass and, then, with marriage and children returned. With a careful statistical analysis of available data, Smith concludes that this pattern will not hold for the future: "Although we are not in the

business of predicting the future, we doubt that today's emerging adult Catholics will substantially increase their Mass attendance as they age."<sup>16</sup> This tells us what lies ahead on Sunday mornings—fewer and older people at Sunday Mass. The pattern is in place now, and the *National Study of Youth and Religion* indicates that it will continue, perhaps at an even more accelerated pace.

In a secular age, the choice—if, indeed, it is a deliberate decision—not to go to Mass on Sunday makes perfect sense. There are plenty of other things to do on Sunday from sports to shopping to doing laundry to visiting with friends. Church is one option and certainly not as immediately enticing as the others. Besides, God doesn't take my absence personally. Remember, if there is a god in a secular age, it is an impersonal god, a spin-off of Deism. Finally, the often heard complaint about Mass, "I don't get anything out of it," makes sense in an age characterized by expressive individualism (the ritual is given to me and I didn't make it and so it's not mine) and the supreme value of personal choice (I decide what I want to do, and imposing rules is ridiculous).

The fact of declining participation in Sunday Mass now and into the future could be construed in our secular age as a marketing problem. "How do we increase our market share on Sunday mornings?" someone might ask. In fact, some of the Protestant megachurches, notably Willow Creek, have utilized market research to determine how to bring more people into church. The research checks out preferences for parking, seat size, musical styles, child care, length of service, and other things as well. In a Catholic context, however, the challenge is not about upping numbers. Sunday worship is about an essence and identity so close to believers that historically it has been worth dying for.

The Eucharist is so inextricably bound to Catholic faith that it is unimaginable to have a Catholic church without having the Eucharist. At the personal level, it is impossible to be Catholic and not be connected to the Eucharist. Words from John Paul II's apostolic letter *Dies Domini* come to mind: "When, during the persecution of

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *Young Catholic America*, 54.

Diocletian, their assemblies were banned with the greatest severity, many were courageous enough to defy the imperial decree and accepted death rather than miss the Sunday Eucharist. This was the case of the martyrs of Abitina, in Proconsular Africa, who replied to their accusers: 'Without fear of any kind we have celebrated the Lord's Supper, because it cannot be missed; that is our law'; 'We cannot live without the Lord's Supper' [*Sine dominico non possumus*]."<sup>17</sup>

Emerging young adults signal future directions for participation in the life of the Catholic Church. Some (very few) participate weekly in what church tradition identifies as "the source and summit of the Christian life," the Mass.<sup>18</sup> More participate sporadically. And the overwhelming majority participates infrequently or rarely. It appears that in the future, Sunday mornings will bring relatively small assemblies of believers together to celebrate and enact the central Christian mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord. This prediction, of course, depends on extrapolating to the future from current trends, especially with the Catholic emerging adult population.

*Acceptance of Catholic beliefs and values.* Catholic Christianity has an important doctrinal core. Catholic tradition holds that there are decisively important truths of faith that believers are called to embrace and then live out in the course of their daily lives. Historically, to deny the content of faith or to ignore it as irrelevant was tantamount to separating oneself from the community. The word "heresy" itself means a "cutting off" or "separation." Precise adherence to carefully formulated doctrine, however, runs counter to central tenets of our secular age. Truth, for example, in a pluralistic world does not have the fixed and stable value that it might once have had. It may be truth for me or truth for you, but it never quite gets to the point of being truth in itself, plain and simple, and that includes religious truth. If Catholic emerging adults are more shaped by the secular culture within which they live than the received truth of the Catholic tradition, then one can predict where they stand on elements of Catholic faith does not resemble Catholic belief in any

<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, *Dies Domini* (On Keeping the Lord's Day Holy) 46, May 31, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 11; see also *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) 10.

recognizable way. And Christian Smith's study bears this out for a large swath of young Catholic emerging adults.

An important clarification is in order. The truths expressed and embraced by Catholic faith are not simply cognitive statements of beliefs that belong peculiarly to the Catholic tradition. These truths are truths meant to bring people into relationship with Jesus Christ and to shape the way they live. They are also truths that one can and sometimes ought to die for, as the two-thousand-year history of countless martyrs testifies. So, if Christian Smith's results indicate that Catholic emerging adults have a rather cavalier attitude toward matters of faith, this is a significant issue of basic identity. Such an attitude may stem from the bias of a secular age in the direction of relativism—nothing matters very much and certainly nothing matters absolutely.

Another, even more significant, source for this listless attitude in matters of faith is a lack of exposure to the Catholic faith tradition. This means that these young people may never have learned what the faith tradition is, or if they acquired some knowledge of it, it came by way of popular media, a notoriously unreliable resource for matters concerning Catholic faith. Smith's research does not take him into the specific area of the lack of religious formation of young people, but he does offer a startling statistic that hints at its huge absence: "71 percent of white Catholics report never reading the Bible, while 54 to 60 percent of Hispanic Catholics report the same."<sup>19</sup> If there is no contact ("never read") with the word of God contained in the Scriptures, surely there is bound to be a deficit in knowing what the Catholic faith is about and what its core beliefs and convictions are.

So what exactly do these Catholic emerging adults hold as their beliefs and what does this portend for the future of the Catholic Church? I would select three areas for which Smith offers data, and I will restrict the results to those pertaining to white Catholics. By the third generation, Hispanics are nearly indistinguishable from their white coreligionists. The three areas are (1) view of God; (2) view of Jesus; (3) who goes to heaven.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Young Catholic America*, 73.

For their view of God, 54 percent of these young believers hold that God is a personal being involved in the lives of people. Another 38 percent have a “something else” view of God, perhaps as “higher power” or an impersonal force. Finally about 8 percent do not believe in God. Nearly half of the respondents do not have an orthodox belief in God.

The way that Catholic emerging adults view Jesus aligns somewhat more closely with orthodox Catholic teaching: 61 percent believe that he is the Son of God and that he was raised from the dead. At the same time, about 31 percent do not accept him as the Son of God. And approximately 8 percent are unsure about what they believe concerning Jesus. Although 61 percent share belief in Jesus Christ as the Catholic Church teaches it, a relatively large percentage remain unconvinced about the one who is at the center of Christian faith.

The next area raises the question, who goes to heaven? This question represents far more than an invitation to offer a detached opinion. It has a direct bearing on how people view salvation in Jesus Christ, how they respond to it, and what the implications of faith are for living life right now. A stunning 48 percent are either unsure about heaven or simply do not believe in it. Then 24 percent believe that good people or all people go to heaven. Finally, a scant 28 percent have an orthodox belief that those people go to heaven whose sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Catholic tradition holds that what a person believes is decisively important. As we look to Catholic emerging young adults and project their faith into the future, the content of belief does not seem—in their estimation and practice—to be that important. An important link to Catholic tradition, the convictions of faith, seems likely to weaken as we move into the future.

Were these questions of faith exclusively about articulating and embracing traditional or orthodox formulations of belief, we would already have considerable reason to be concerned. There is, however, another dimension that should dramatically heighten that concern about the future. It is the question of values and putting the convictions of faith into practice in daily life, in other words, the moral implications and consequences of embracing Christian faith. Smith synthesizes the state of the question for Catholic emerging young

adults by reflecting on those whom he has been interviewing across their teen years and, now, into emerging young adulthood. It is worthwhile to cite one of his synthetic paragraphs in its entirety:

Many emerging adults pursue (what they think might be) happiness through experimentation—by “trying out” and “trying on” different identities, careers, relationships, and intoxicating substances. Both the traditions of the Catholic faith generally and its prohibitions against unmarried sex, heavy drinking, and illegal drugs specifically are completely at odds with what it means in this culture to “come of age” as a mature or fulfilled emerging adult, as our interviewees see it. A basic incongruence exists between the central assumptions and values of emerging adult culture and those of the Catholic Church. Many of the teenagers we interviewed in our first wave of data collection agreed with the Church’s teaching against sex outside of marriage; but five years later, by wave three, when they had entered emerging adulthood, almost none still held this view and only one or two of those we interviewed actually followed it for religious reasons.<sup>20</sup>

This subsection began with the title “acceptance of Catholic beliefs and values.” Our purpose was to see, with the help of Christian Smith’s longitudinal sociological study, where Catholic emerging adults stood with Catholic beliefs and values. Smith’s study tells us that a very large swath of these Catholic emerging adults is, in effect, unmoored from the Catholic tradition. They may not know it or, if they do know it, they may not understand it. The majority certainly does not accept traditional or orthodox Catholic belief from which they seem largely disconnected or, minimally, to which they are very lightly connected. If this cohort is a leading edge of the church’s future, then there is considerable reason to be concerned about the future. Currently, these trends seem to be firmly in place, and any change or reversal seems unlikely. There remains a third and final area to explore, the question of identification and affiliation with the Catholic faith.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

*General patterns of identification and affiliation with the Catholic faith and the Catholic Church.* If we want a sense of the future of the church, then one obvious question needs to be answered: How many young people do we seem to be able to retain now and, so, how many do we anticipate retaining in the future? The question of retention is not just a matter of “hanging on” to individuals. Rather, it means knowing how they identify themselves and how they affiliate with the Catholic faith and the Catholic Church. Understanding these patterns ought to give us some insight into the future. There is, however, a significant difficulty in making these determinations, as Christian Smith discovered in the course of his research.

Smith raises this question: “Who, when it comes to social science analysis of emerging adults, actually *is* a Catholic? The answer may seem simple: people who say they are Catholic. But answering this surprisingly complicated question is actually not so easy. . . . This question does not have a straightforward answer. American youth today often experience unusual life situations that complicate the way they understand and express their religious affiliation(s) and identity(ies).”<sup>21</sup> We cannot and we need not rehearse Smith’s carefully argued approach to identifying who actually is a Catholic. He concludes with seven types of Catholics: completely Catholic, mostly Catholic, somewhat Catholic, nominally Catholic, family Catholic, previous Catholic, and secondary Catholic. These types reflect something of the secular culture with its relativistic bent and with postmodernism that refuses to buckle under rigid categories, for example, the dichotomous choice of Catholic or non-Catholic. From all this, I conclude that we must move cautiously and critically when sociological studies suggest overall trends for “the Catholic population.” We might never be exactly sure who is included.

For trends of Catholic youth identifying and affiliating as Catholics, I find another result of Smith’s research more compelling and helpful. He draws on the narrative accounts of forty-one young people from the beginning of the study when some of them were as young as thirteen years old. In the third wave of investigation and interviews,

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

they are now between eighteen and twenty-three. He is quick to point out that where they stand vis-à-vis Catholicism is not necessarily indicative of where all other emerging adults are who have or have had a connection with the Catholic faith. With that caution and limitation, I think what he uncovers in his third wave of interviews can serve to give us a sketch, if not a precisely detailed portrait, of young Catholics past, present, and perhaps future.

Smith begins with forty-one young people who belonged to the first and second waves of interviews. At this point, with the third wave, where do they now stand? Here is a quick summary of results in Smith's categories. I confess that I found the results startling. Of the forty-one, there are seven apostates who have fully abandoned their Catholic identity and not embraced another. Five are switchers, who have replaced their Catholic identity with an evangelical one. There are another eleven estranged, that is, who hold a Catholic identity but are distanced and critical of the church and unlikely to return. Another six are nominal, that is, nonpracticing but might return. And twelve are engaged, who practice in some way but do not grasp or necessarily fully agree with the Catholic faith. Finally, zero can be categorized as devout, those who practice consistently and both believe and understand the church's teaching.

Again, note that this is a very particular sample. Smith relates that on his own campus, Notre Dame, there are good numbers of devout young Catholics. Obviously, that is more than zero. Still, it would seem when you put this sampling together with some of the more general data from Putnam and Campbell, there is a downward trend and a low retention rate. The numbers are troubling for those of us who care for young people and for the future of the church.

## **Conclusions and Reflections**

We began with a question: What can we expect? In the United States, what can we expect for the future of the Catholic Church and for the future of believers? The short answer, based on the philosophical, historical, cultural, and sociological studies we have considered, is decline. We can anticipate such a decline because of trends that have long been in motion.

We live, in the words of Charles Taylor, in a secular age. Both Taylor and James Davison Hunter help us see that over a long period a kind of secularity has shaped the culture in which we live. In fact, the forces of secularity have shaped our culture and our very selves far beyond anything believers could do to shape secularity itself. Furthermore, a closed-ended form of secularity has been ascendant and gives no sign of retreating. Religious commentators correctly see secularity moving toward increasing tension with the traditions of faith and perhaps arriving at a point of complete incompatibility with the claims and practices of faith. In stark contrast to secularity, Christian faith seems antihuman and even irrational.

Once, the church managed the means of communication and the arts. Now, the “rich producers” of culture in communications, the arts, and education are thoroughly secular. And the secular perspective shapes the ongoing human narrative—telling us who we are and what our purpose is—something previously reserved for religious traditions. A closed-ended secular perspective also uses technology and drives economies forward devoid of values and is guided only by the principle “if it can be done, do it.” Pope Francis identifies this state of affairs with the emergence of a new and ruthless idolatry. It is “the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose. The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real concern for human beings; man is reduced to one of his needs alone: consumption.”<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis effectively uncovers the failed humanism of closed-ended secularization.

Even in a nation of believers—as the United States is by any standards—the forces of secularity dominate in shaping the culture, so that believers often feel like strangers in their own land. And closed-ended secularity delivers a complex set of messages to “religious America.” Sometimes, secularity actually prizes forms of religiosity but only as interesting and collectible artifacts. Some of the most ardent supporters of Christian art and music, for example, have no interest in what inspired the art or music but rather invest in their

<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) 55, November 24, 2013.

aesthetic values. Another strategy of closed-ended secularity vis-à-vis religiosity is to erase faith's imprint in society (politics, law, institutional life) to the extent that religiosity seems to create roadblocks to full human emancipation, that is, the full and free self-determination of individuals. In recent decades, this has been noticeably evident in the collisions of religion and feminism and religion and gay rights. A final strategy of closed-ended secularism is to contain religiosity, that is, to enclose it and relegate it to a private and personal practice, so that it cannot contaminate the public sphere with its prejudices and various forms of human diminishment.

We have been considering a closed-ended form of secularity, and that form inevitably finds itself at loggerheads with religion and faith. It is not, however, the only possible form of secularity. It is also possible, as the Second Vatican Council affirmed and as we already noted, to have an open-ended secularity that fosters and continues the good developments that have emerged from secularization but not at a cost of diminishing or eliminating religion or faith. In fact, faith and religion can flourish in a particular kind of secular environment. What might that environment look like?

Open-ended secularity shares with other forms of secularity a commitment to rationality, to human reason, and to an empirical-logical knowledge process. Unlike a closed-ended form of secularity, an open-ended form also embraces other forms of knowledge that are not irrational but suprarational and intuitive. In a way reminiscent of Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem, an open-ended secularity recognizes the incompleteness of any system closed in on itself. This form of secularity also emphasizes human solidarity and relational and participatory priorities in the social, political, and economic organization of human beings. This stands in stark contrast to a closed-ended form of secularity that asserts and affirms a radical autonomy of the individual. Finally, this open-ended secularity allows a place for transcendent hope, the possibility of a future that is not merely dependent on human construction.

We are most familiar with closed-ended forms of secularity. And they suggest a future of religion and faith in decline. In that context, the church can be thrust into a defensive mode and even a struggle for survival, which happened in the totalitarian regimes in the twentieth

century. Although the closed-ended forms of secularity seem likely to dominate the future, because they dominate the current cultural landscape in America, an alternate future scenario could emerge. An open-ended secularity that fits more comfortably with religion and faith commitments remains a possibility but, in truth, a less likely one.

In light of life in a secular age, we asked a specific question: How does the secular culture affect young people whose religious commitments today give us a window into the future of faith and the church in the United States? Sociological studies, primarily those conducted by Christian Smith, indicated the powerful shaping force of the secular culture. For example, the secular culture has formed large numbers of young people—perhaps not all and perhaps not all with the same force—in certain dispositions: attention to the here and now, a focus on the individual, the primacy of personal choice, a desire for personal expression, a contentment with short-term results and realities, and a diminished sense or even lack of what Paul Tillich called “ultimate concern.” These dispositions have a dramatic impact on faith and religious participation. They translate into weak communal participation in rituals including the core ritual of Sunday Mass, loose doctrinal adherence, a marginal impact of faith on daily life choices, and a relative absence of the tangible faith symbols that serve as identity markers and reminders of transcendent meaning. For the future, it looks like much fewer “real Catholics” (even as Christian Smith admittedly struggled to pinpoint the meaning of that category) and many more either very loosely affiliated with the church or simply gone from the community of faith.

Permit me to add a personal anecdotal postscript to explain how that anticipated bleak future for the Catholic faith and the Catholic Church in the United States has already in some measure arrived. In Chicago, they call the obituary notices in the daily newspapers the Irish sports page. The Irish are famously diligent in perusing the notices, finding out who died, and determining the wakes and funerals that they should attend. I’ve caught some of that Irish spirit, and I generally do check through the obituaries. And I have found some significant indicators for the life of faith and the life of the church.

More and more I see names in the obituaries that have a Catholic ring to them—Irish, Italian, and Polish, for example—but there is

no indication that a funeral Mass will be celebrated. For whatever reason, what is a deeply ingrained Catholic practice—the funeral Mass—is bypassed in favor of a service at the funeral home. And then there are other obituaries that do mention a Catholic church service, but it is listed as a “celebration of life.”

How people deal with death is an accurate barometer of their faith and their participation in the life of the church. The experience of death puts us squarely before the fundamental questions of our existence. Does death have the last word? If so, then it makes sense to memorialize, to eulogize, and to celebrate the life of the deceased, because that is all that is left to us. Does the death and resurrection of the Lord made present in the celebration of the Mass not really matter that much? If so, then it makes sense to bypass the funeral Mass and the opportunity to reaffirm our faith that in dying Christ destroyed our death and in his rising restored our life. Clearly our funeral practices do provide a barometer of faith. What we do with death—certainly in a Christian context—puts us in touch with our faith or lack of faith.

These are my impressions from a casual reading of the obituaries in the Chicago newspapers. In fact, I have found confirmation from priests in parishes and from some statistical data as well. Catholic funerals traditionally celebrated are on the decline. That fact illustrates that Catholic faith and participation are not only on a downward slope among Catholic emerging adults but, in some measure, a decline in faith has already begun to reach an older, dying generation.

After this, anyone who loves and cares for the church and its people and faith must surely be tempted to profound discouragement. That discouragement would seem to stem from what looks like a future collapse that has already begun. And if all we have is this data from philosophy, history, culture, and sociology, then there is more than sufficient reason for sadness. In fact, there is more to the story. The future is not assured in any particular form. We must leave room for the unexpected. And we will explore that shortly. Besides, we are not just the pawns of forces beyond us. As people of faith, we believe that we can be by God’s grace and, indeed, are protagonists of our own history. And that is also something that we shall explore later. Our next step is to consider the unexpected.