

When first asked to present this response, and hearing the title, I instantly thought of my own grandmother, Nan and going to her church. I was one of five so any one-on-one attention with my grandmother was a treat. I spent many weekends with her and Sundays usually started with mass at Visitation Church in the south Plaza area, followed by an outing to the Plaza library or lunch at Winstead's and a movie. Because of these anticipated outings, Nan's socializing with seemingly everyone in the parish after mass was a true test of a seven-year old's patience. Though St. Elizabeth's was my home parish growing up, my life circumstances led me to raise my own family in Visitation parish and I found myself laughing many occasions at the pain I put my own children through as I, channeling my grandmother, socialized with many people after mass. But what I did not realize as a seven-year-old, as I observed my grandmother in parish life, nor did my kids when they were little, is that I was watching a foundation being poured for me, and invariably, for my own children and grandchildren.

My grandmother's church, in that sense, is the same church I have now, and there are some indicators that those same foundational elements that she passed to me will still exist for my own grandchildren.

I do not have time to go into the unique history at Vis of the upstairs mass and the Tighe Hall masses, a practice halted with the building of the new church so

as to house the whole parish, but mention it because it speaks to the necessity to consider the particularities of local church, even at the parish level. And, to the need for change when the practice of a community, or an entire Church, needs to change to meet the needs of the faith community. In my reflection on Father Smith's presentation, the local church is what I come back to again and again.

My response has two parts...one request to consider an overlooked desire of young Catholics (which is the local consideration I mentioned) and then a big picture question to further the discussion Father Smith starts with his reflection. In the spirit of Father James' meditation and questions for us, each of the considerations will be through a lens of hope.

First, a quick intro to my CV to position myself as someone who can respond to Father James. I believe I was invited to do this response because of my work in a Catholic high school and now in a parish environment. I have a master's degree from Creighton University and spent the ten years after graduation teaching theology, I then transitioned to parish work, which is a natural fit both because of my degree and because of my experience as active parishioner for the last 20 years.

I mentioned teaching at St. Teresa's Academy, a task increasingly more difficult as the Catholic-but-barely-practicing population increased. It was always interesting, and amusing that students clearly understood that math or science

classes built on each other and whatever they learned at the 8th grade level, or dare we say, 2nd grade level would, of course, not suffice at the high school level, but many seemed quite content with that when it came to theology. There was an unearned confidence in their knowledge base - a lot of eye-rolling and grumbling-  
“We already studied this in grade school.”

My initial response when Father James shared with me was the idea of the “American Catholic”. I would invite all of us to consider your own reaction when you hear “American Catholic”. I myself only knew that distinction in theory from grad school, but more concretely when I visited churches outside the country. This experience was quite different depending on if I was attending mass in Guatemala or in Rome. One major difference is the idea of Catholicism as being more so cultural than necessarily religious. I don’t think we see that as much here in America, though there is the rise of the self-identified “recovering Catholic”.

However, I do think the parishioner from the Most Holy Redeemer captured it completely when they conceded the existence of American Catholicism, but rejects the idea it can be captured in that limiting term. I think Father Smith’s article proves that we almost always have to put a qualifier ahead of “American Catholic” ...such as “mid-west” “southern”, “east coast”, “Black” Latinx”, etc....

Father James does highlight three points that probably describes most younger “American” Catholics-they are growing more diverse ethnically and culturally, they are more liberal or progressive than older Catholics and there is a point of no return on cultural shifts. The first two points are probably pretty consistent with our historical experience (i.e.-the social unrest of the 60s), but the third point is most distressing. There is no current strong stabilizing institution that these young Catholics can turn to as they age. The church has lost its credibility, the government is a mess and educational institutions are also losing ground. No institution can keep up with a cancellation culture at the speed of the internet. This lends credence to the instability that Father Smith speaks about. He doesn’t mention this, but as an educator I was faced with almost on the daily the appalling rising statistics of anxiety, depression, suicide rates. It cannot be a coincidence that those statistics increase while the credibility of our major stabilizing institutions decreases.

But, let’s stay with the Church. And, hope.

Two groups that are often topics of discussion these days are the “nones” the self-proclaimed non-affiliated and, on the other side of the spectrum, the wave of hyper-conservatives that seem to cling to a church that they did not ever actually know- the phenomena of “weltschmerz”. But, Father James also mentions a

different growing phenomenon that if the young Catholics did come back to church, it will be not be a church they know. I tend to agree with this. As I mentioned before, I experienced in my last few years at St. Teresa's a growing population of "unchurched" students. The families just don't attend anymore.

This is a trend that I continue to see in my new position as a pastoral associate. Mass attendance is down and in a recent survey, an overwhelming number of much older Catholics indicated dismay that younger Catholics with families were not coming to mass, and that they wanted them to know they were missed. As I am sure rings true with many parish communities, we are seeing the same group of people at all the events and doing most of the work. Yet, this group is aging and the back-up team is not ready.

However, there is hope. I work with engaged couples and many attend only occasionally (self-reporting) but across the board share a desire to raise their families in a parish. Across the board, this is described as part of their own foundational experiences growing up. They clearly understand the value of an active faith life, of being part of the community and of raising their kids with ritual and community. They clearly want the benefits and will even commit to the desire by getting married in the church. They almost all acknowledge a plan to "attend mass more". This has become so automatic and expected that I have been actually

pushing back with a “what are you waiting for” and a gentle reminder that they are asking something of the church that only exists if people (like the parishioners that gave them that experience they desire for their families) are participating at the parish level. So, it’s time to give back what they received.

This desire is not separate from all of the obstacles Father Smith mentions, so the question then is how does the Church meet this perpetual Augustinian desire, or restlessness, to be in relationship with God for our younger generations?

Father James points out that Christian practice will persist and it might even be extra-parochial, and I agree, but he has only brought us to the threshold. The big question is what vehicle, meaning what institution is going to provide this path? Will it be religious orders? Do they have the influence or even the geographical stability to do so? How many Catholics have the exposure to religious orders? Will it be a combination of Catholic educational institutions? Though I find myself dismayed as the institutional church is proving again and again it doesn’t believe in that relationship. We keep hearing of established parishes being moved out of universities and replacing them with local jurisdiction. Though based Father James’ statistical report on the numbers of priests that do not trust their bishops as leaders, that seems unsustainable as well.

I am not sure what the answer to this question is. I don't even know if I have to answer it specifically as an American Catholic, but I firmly believe it will continue to have the qualities Father Smith highlights here-I think the path will still have to and will be communal, center on ritual, be Eucharistic in nature and practice, and will give sustained hope to the human condition. I feel that in addition, there will be an increased inclusivity dynamic and social component. The young Catholics I speak about will demand this.

And, lastly, I anticipate that at some celebration of it, I, myself, will have a grandchild or two impatiently waiting while I delay our planned Sunday outing as I socialize with seemingly everyone in my community. But, as I did with my grandma, and my kids did with me, they will also be observing and learning.