

At the beginning of *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith* from 2009, Jerome Baggett, a sociologist of religion who teaches at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University at Berkeley and at Graduate Theological Union, quotes a parishioner from Most Holy Redeemer:

“The thing about American Catholicism is that it both exists and doesn’t exist! What do I mean by that? I mean it exists in the sense that it’s an *it*, something you and I can talk about, and we can identify elements of it and so forth. But it doesn’t exist as some monolithic, unchanging thing. It’s not as if any one person understands it and lives it out the same way all the time or in quite the same way as anyone else.”<sup>1</sup>

On the other side of the continental United States, Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada writes in *Lifeblood of the Parish: Men and Catholic Devotion in Williamsburg, Brooklyn*:

Devotion is not simply about intimate connections to the saints but contributes to the very construction of masculinity and authority in religious communities. Angry, disaffected men, empty pews, and shuttering parishes define this contemporary moment in discussions of American men and discussions of the Catholic Church. In a time when scholars and journalists alike agree that there is a growing malaise among men and that the Catholic Church is in crisis, I argue that churches continue to be vital sites for the making of masculinity.<sup>2</sup>

My reflection today sits in between the two of them—both geographically and conceptually. There is a type of crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States, though one that gets overstated by many. There is also an ambiguity in what American Catholicism is, or more pointedly, who counts as belonging inside of American Catholicism. To get a gauge of where we might be going in 40 or 50 years—our grandkids’ church so to speak—it is helpful to take a step back and see where we have been and where we are. After this foray into one part of recent American Catholic history, I will turn to the history of tomorrow.

However, there is a caveat to those two points of reference—the past and the present. For both, there can be a type of nostalgia, a feeling of what was or what is and not an accurate representation. In one of the BBC Reith Lectures, Hilary Mantel, author of *Wolf Hall*, stated:

Evidence is always partial. Facts are not truth, though they are part of it—information is not knowledge. And history is not the past - it is the method we have evolved of organizing our ignorance of the past. It’s the record of what’s left on the record. It is the multiplication of the evidence of fallible and biased witnesses, combined with incomplete accounts of actions not fully understood by the people who performed them. It’s no more than the best we can do, and often it falls short of that.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome Baggett, *Sense of the Faithful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada, *Lifeblood of the Parish* (New York: NYU Press, 2020), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Hillary Mantel, “The BBC Reith Lectures-The Day Is for the Living,” BBC, June 13, 2017.

Our gauge of the past and the present is partial and not the full truth, especially when clouded by a nostalgia of self-aggrandizing. A gauge of the history of the American Catholic Church will fall short, but since we are here, let's move forward to the past.

I want to start with the points of comparison—today-ish, 2022, and nearly 40 years earlier with 1985. I am heavily indebted to data and information from CARA at Georgetown University. In the past forty years, there have been significant changes in the U.S. Catholic Church. At the surface level, we might be inclined to consider these shifts as a decline. Quite a bit of the numbers show a decline. In 1985, there were roughly 19,000 parishes in the United States. Today, there are roughly 16,000. The number of priests has dropped 23,000 from 57,000 in 1985 to 34,000 today. In religious orders the number of priests has more than halved from 22,000 to 10,000. The sharpest decline has been in the number of women religious—from 115,000 in 1985 to 36,000 (178,000 women religious in 1965).

Catholic schools have followed these numbers. The number of students in Catholic schools has substantially dropped: 2 million to 1.2 million in Catholic elementary schools, 775,000 to 525,000 in Catholic high schools, and 830,000 to 400,000 in religious education for high school students. Even the number of Catholic colleges has dropped from 243 to 220.

However, those declines tell a part of the story. The number of Catholic colleges has declined, but the number of students at Catholic colleges has increased during the same time, from 545,000 to more than 700,000.<sup>4</sup> The number of parishes in the U.S. has declined 3,000, roughly 400 every 5 years, but none of that decline appeared until 2000. If we look at the number of parishes by region of the country over the time period, we see a steady decline in New England, the Great Lakes and Midwest regions, but an increase in the Atlantic South, urban parts throughout the Central region, and a constant, steady increase in California. To borrow from Southwest Airlines, “you are free to move about the cabin” applies as equally to American Catholics as Americans in where they are moving, working, and living.

The most shocking data on Catholic institutions and shifts in the U.S. is probably in Catholic health care. The number of Catholic hospitals in the past 40 years has declined from 630 to 520. However, the number of people served by Catholic hospitals for their primary care has almost tripled from 36.6 million to 84.4 million.<sup>5</sup> According to the Catholic Health Care Association of the USA, 1 in 7 Americans finds their primary care at a Catholic hospital.<sup>6</sup> In my home state of Indiana, St. Vincent Hospital, and later Ascension Health, bought out dozens of community hospitals which had gone under. My home county's hospital declared bankruptcy one

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<sup>4</sup> Also, the number of foreign-born adult Catholics has tripled from 5.4 million to 15 million. The changes in American Catholic demographics reflect (at a faster pace) the changes in American demographics.

<sup>5</sup> “Frequently Requested Statistics,” CARA, Georgetown University, last updated 2023, <<https://cara.georgetown.edu/faqs>>.

<sup>6</sup> “Catholic Health Care in the United States,” Catholic Health Association of the United States, 2023 <<https://www.chausa.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/the-strategic-profile.pdf>>.

day and reopened next day as a Catholic hospital. Without the purchase of small, rural, county hospitals, dozens of Indiana counties would have been without a hospital.

Not all Catholic institutions are in decline, and those whose numbers are shifting raise the question: what counts as decline? Just the numbers? The collection baskets or budgets? What role does quality-not just quantity-have in describing change or continuity in American Catholicism?

Before diving too deeply into qualitative data, I think it is helpful to take a different angle at quantitative data on the U.S. Catholic Church. Instead of looking at decline or growth in institutions, a perspective of younger American Catholics today is helpful and instructive, I think, to putting the decline/growth dialectic into perspective. There are three major points about younger American Catholics: (1) they are growingly diverse ethnically and culturally; (2) they are more liberal or progressive on social issues compared to older American Catholics; and (3) there is likely a point-of-no-return on cultural shifts upon younger Americans, and likewise, American Catholics.

First, let us look at the growing diversity in the U.S. Catholic Church. There is good news and better news. The good news is that the Catholic Church in the U.S. is in decline. That was a mistake. Let me rephrase: the good news is that the White Catholic Church in the United States is in decline. The United States, across the board, is growingly less-and-less White majority. For example, in the group of Catholics under the age of 30, only White Catholics have less than 20% of the White Catholic population under the age of 30. For Black Catholics, Latino/a Catholics, and Asian-American Catholics more than 60% are under the age of 50. A majority of non-White Catholics is under the age of 50. The average age of White Catholics is far older than every other ethnic group in the U.S. Catholic Church. To reverse it, the average non-White Catholic is younger than the average White Catholic. For Catholics under the age of 30, the number of White Catholics is identical or slightly less than the number of Latino/a Catholics. Under the age of 18, Latino/a Catholics are a majority.<sup>7</sup> What was once a projection for 2040 or 2050 of Latino/a Catholics as a majority is a reality much faster than imagined.

The age and ethnicity angle of American Catholics is a helpful and necessary angle when considering changes in religious orders today—both men and women. If there is a decline in White Catholics in the American Catholic Church, which there is, then it would be reasonable to expect a decline in religious orders if these orders retain and maintain White cultural structures and frameworks. More specifically to younger Catholics, what do they look like?

Younger Catholics are more liberal or progressive on issues. These issues range from abortion, size of the government, the environment, and sexuality. A recent study found that 15% of Gen Zers self-identified as bisexual, more than doubling any previous generation's numbers

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<sup>7</sup> “Age Distribution among Catholics,” Pew Research Center, 2020 <<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/catholic/age-distribution/#demographic-information>>.

for bisexual self-identification. One in six Gen Zers self-identify as LGBT.<sup>8</sup> Notably, the U.S. and the North American report submitted to the Synod on Synodality was the first official document from American Catholic bishops to reference LGBT in the text of a document itself. In both directions on the subject of sexuality—embrace or engagement and restriction or prohibition—there is sizable energy in the U.S. Catholic Church to address diversity. One of the invited speakers at the Eucharistic Congress this summer has promoted reparative therapy for LGBT persons for decades.<sup>9</sup>

It is also incredibly important to situate where younger Catholics are and where they have been. All Catholics under the age of 40 have no memory of the liturgical reforms after Vatican II. Advent 1968 was 27 years before I was born. Catholics 40 and under are generationally removed from the “liturgy wars” which defined the ecclesiology tensions in the U.S. Catholic Church in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. For those reaching back to a “tradition” in the liturgy today, it is not a tradition in which or from which they have personal experience. It is a nostalgia for something they have not experienced. For example, the Roman Canon from Cardinal Cushing at President Kennedy’s funeral could be described as more fluent in the Boston accent than Latin.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, younger Catholics do not have a point of reference before Boston 2002. The sex abuse coverup crisis which exploded in Boston in January and February 2002, with more than forty consecutive days of front page coverage of the cover-up scandal, is one of the fundamental lenses when looking at American Catholicism today. The fact that the Boston Globe’s Spotlight team’s reporting was put on hold due to September 11, 2001 should help emphasize two points on younger American Catholics: instability and a loss of credibility. There is an instability in authoritative institutions around young Americans, and there is a loss in the credibility of people in authority. For American Catholics the second point is compounded by the revelations in the then-Cardinal McCarrick scandal which reveals that to this day, Catholic bishops are not subject to the Dallas Charter.<sup>11</sup>

Third, American culture is at a tipping point that does not seem reversible. In generations preceding millennials, similar forecasts were made regarding shifts in U.S. culture. However, some type of stability seems to have emerged in generations before millennials, particularly around the mid-40s range for people of the particular generation. Getting married, raising

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<sup>8</sup> Julianne McShane, “A record number of U.S. adults identify as LGBTQ. Gen Z is driving the increase,” February 17, 2022, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/02/17/adults-identifying-lgbt-gen-z/>>.

<sup>9</sup> Chris Damian addresses the promotion of reparative therapy by “Theology of the Body” writers and speakers. “Christopher West, Jason Evert, and conversion therapy,” October 3, 2021, <<https://chrisdamian.substack.com/p/christopher-west-jason-evert-and>>.

<sup>10</sup> “JFK Funeral Mass (Eucharistic Prayer) - Cardinal Cushing,” November 25, 1963, uploaded August 2, 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiU1wljMx2o>>.

<sup>11</sup> “McCarrick, the bishops, and unanswered questions,” Catholic News Agency, July 23, 2018, <<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/38946/mccarrick-the-bishops-and-unanswered-questions>>.

children, moving to the suburbs, and purchasing a home, these steps indicated an inflection point. One example of this inflection point would be to look at the 1960s generation of Americans in their late teens and early twenties who protested, partied, and pushed against “normative” claims in American culture. Today, that generation has stabilized along the trend lines of each generation before it. So why would millennials and younger generations be different?

In the simplest of terms, I suggest it is two things: James Carville’s famous words and religion. “It’s the economy stupid” and disaffiliated/unaffiliated. Since the economic collapse of 2008, the “recovery” in the U.S. has not been across the board. I graduated from college in 2009. Dozens of my classmates who graduated with honors with employable degrees—education, business, finance, psychology—went more than 18 months without finding full-time employment. Purchasing a home is off the table for most millennials. Stability, at least in terms of economics, is not part of the equation for those under 40 today.<sup>12</sup>

Religion is the other major factor that has been exhausted in recent studies of young adults and youth. Topics like the “nones and the nuns,” or more recently explorations of the unaffiliated and disaffiliated—those who never grew up in a tradition and those who have walked away from a tradition—highlight that if millennials and younger generations attend church in 10-20 years, they are not “returning” to their faith. They are arriving for the first time. They would be discovering a faith that was not theirs before—in terms of regular engagement in a congregation or parish. There is validity to American Catholic bishops calling the sacrament of confirmation, the sacrament of goodbye.<sup>13</sup> These components of the Catholic Church today—economics and un- or dis-affiliation—gives a bit of a perspective to the present moment by way of the recent past. Now, I will turn to the future by way of the present to begin to think about future possibilities.

To pause before moving to the history of tomorrow, again with all the caveats from Hillary Mantel, I want to circle back to the introduction from Jerome Baggett and Alyssa Maldonada-Estrada— “It’s not as if any one person understands it (American Catholicism) and lives it out the same way all the time or in quite the same way as anyone else,” and “churches continue to be vital sites for the making of masculinity.” American Catholicism, particularly among young Catholics, is lived out through growing diversity and numerous ecclesial sites, including but not limited to parish churches, are sites for making something—some sort of concrete action.

One of the most frustrating thing of reading studies or research projects sometimes is how obvious the data or conclusion is. This conversation could be the same, and so it is helpful to point out the obvious for today. We are not in a parish church. We are not in a diocesan Catholic

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<sup>12</sup> Mike Allen, “America’s your goes left,” Axios, January 18, 2022. <<https://www.axios.com/2022/01/18/youth-politics-polling-democrats>>. See also the growing “fatalism” of young Americans in political engagement, <<https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/young-voters-have-growing-power-broken-politics-leave-them-fatalistic-studies-find>>.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Candidates for Confirmation from the Diocese of Genoa,” May 21, 2022, accessed December 7, 2023, <<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/may/documents/20220521-cresimandi-genova.html>>.

institution. We are in a physical, in-person space and a digital, virtual space. In the first version of this talk, I spoke in the Gaspar Room at St. Charles Center in the retirement house of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood in rural Ohio, where, up until recently, in that Ohio county, there was mass offered nearly every half-hour from 7 a.m. until 12 p.m. across 20 different parishes. Those 20 parishes served less than 25,000 people. A conversation about the future of the church was extra-parochial. I think that points to the future tense and the present tense of the grammar of the American Catholic church.

In 2022 Catholic University of America released a national study of priests and bishops, the first of its kind in more than 50 years. 131 bishops responded along with 3500 priests. The study found priests reported a very high level of well-being, consistent with other studies that find clergy have the highest level of satisfaction in their career among all job fields. It also found a high degree of burnout among clergy. Those two findings are not surprising. On the question of whether bishops would help a priest with personal struggles, 92% of bishops said yes. Only 36% of priests said yes. The highest response from priests for confidence in a superior came from religious priests at 67%. For trust in “the bishops” in general, priests responded a 24% confidence rate.<sup>14</sup> The primary crisis in the U.S. Catholic Church is not a generational crisis but a crisis of trust and confidence in leadership.

To repeat from the events from January 2002 forward, the sex abuse coverup crisis continues to ripple and ripple again throughout the U.S. Church. Dioceses are filing for bankruptcy protections. State attorney generals are convening grand juries. Lawsuits continue to be filed. The present moment in the U.S. Catholic Church, and likely into the future, is outside of being under the steeples of cathedrals or basilicas. Bishops, and by extensions priests, continue to erode trust and accepted authority from the people in the pews. Religious orders and sites like monasteries, abbeys, retreat centers, and other Catholic institutions which can optimize their Catholic identity through a particular charism are to be likely continued centers of American Catholicism. Religious orders and these sites have an opportunity to emphasize a Catholicity that resonates with people in the pew while escaping the messiness under the mitre and formal authority of the diocesan structure of the church. The future of the American Catholic Church is somewhere away from the loss of legitimacy of bishops and the like post-Boston 2002. A second point of the present and future beyond trust and authority in the Catholic Church is the urbanization of the U.S. and a parallel of the diversification of the U.S.

More than ten years after his book, *The Shared Parish*, Brett Hoover revisited the dynamic of multicultural settings in American Catholic parishes. In “Still Unaccommodated: Why Are Hispanic Catholics Treated Unequally in So Many U.S. Parishes,” Hoover wrote, “After more than a decade of researching parish life, and after teaching many cohorts of diverse pastoral ministers, something has become disturbingly clear to me: institutionalized racial and ethnic

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<sup>14</sup> Brandon Vaidyanathan, Christopher Jacobi, Chelsea Rae Kelly, Stephen White, Sara Perla, “Well-being, Trust, and Policy in a Time of Crisis: Highlights from the National Study of Catholic Priests,” The Catholic Project-The Catholic University of America, October 2022, <<https://catholicproject.catholic.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Catholic-Project-Final.pdf>>.

inequality, especially of the anti-Hispanic variety, is endemic in Catholic parishes.”<sup>15</sup> In *The Shared Parish*, Hoover outlined optimistic hope for how parishes might bridge cultural differences in fusing a community together in the midst of inter-cultural sharing, especially the sharing of personal narratives of pain, loss, hope, and joy. Instead, the trend line of a growingly diverse U.S. Catholic Church has not demonstrated a type of merging traffic. Parishes and congregations in the U.S., both Catholic and Protestant alike, are as ethnically divided as when Martin Luther King, Jr., appeared on *Meet the Press*.

Parallel to the religion segregation 2.0 is the urbanization or re-urbanization of America. More than half of the U.S. population lives in 438 counties. Current estimates suggest 83% of the U.S. population lives in urban areas and will increase to 89% by 2050. Metropolitan areas account for more than 90% of U.S. GDP and U.S. wage income. Poverty rates are also lower in metropolitan areas than rural areas, 11% compared to 14%.<sup>16</sup> In terms of Catholic schools, the demographic and economic data on cities tracks: urban Catholic schools have stabilized, though inner city, i.e., poor, urban Catholic parishes have languished. The days of the center of the U.S. Catholic Church in a rural country parish are gone. In Los Angeles County alone, there are three million Catholics. Three million, in one county. The Catholic Church is growingly urban and growing in the directions in which the United States is growing.

The difficulty posed to the U.S. Catholic Church right now is that as people are moving—geographically, economically, and culturally—the physical infrastructure built up to this moment and built up for this moment is not moving with the people. In the Archdiocese of Chicago, for example, in the restructuring process for parishes throughout the archdiocese, up to 1/4 of parishes may be closed before 2040. The main driver for this restructuring is not attendance, collections, or even clergy. Large, urban dioceses have fewer priests than before, but due to a large population and a large ecosystem of Catholic institutions to feed into diocesan vocations (along with men and women religious in urban areas), but the number of clergy is somewhat stable for the work in parishes. The main driver for the restructuring is property. Buildings are no longer in use and yield a significant liability to the archdiocese. If the maxim on buildings and people holds true, which I think it does: *buildings serve people, not the other way around*, then when people move and the buildings do not, the Catholic Church faces a conundrum.

Physical buildings also relate to the social and cultural buildings of American society in racial and ethnic cultures. To repeat, the American Catholic Church is diversifying as quickly as American society is diversifying. The U.S. Catholic Church is growingly non-White. We are very, very close to a moment in which dioceses house an office for Hispanic Ministry while more than 50% of the diocese is Latino/a. If or when this is the case, a reasonable question emerges if the diocese is first and foremost a White Ministry with a carving out of a minority of the diocese’s resources for the majority of Catholics in that very diocese.

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<sup>15</sup>Brett C. Hoover, "Still Unaccommodated: Why are Hispanic Catholics Treated Unequally in so Many U.S. Parishes?" *Commonweal* 148, no. 7 (2021): 13.

<sup>16</sup>“U.S. Cities Factsheet,” Center for Sustainable Systems, University of Michigan, 2023, Pub. No. CSS09-06, <<https://css.umich.edu/publications/factsheets/built-environment/us-cities-factsheet>>.

A different direction of buildings other than brick and mortar is what we build up through our actions, particularly in what we make or do, as identified by Maldonada-Estrada. Years ago, Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, two practical theologians, explored what they described as Christian practices. In a couple of iterations of defining Christian practices, they landed on this: “By ‘Christian practices’ we mean things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.”<sup>17</sup> To summarize: (1) things done together, thus communal; (2) repetitive in nature; (3) in response and in light of God’s presence; and (4) in an attempt to address fundamental human needs. It is important not to miss the forest for the trees, as if a focus on Christian practices misses things like institutions, cultures, or policies for individual, concrete, and specific acts as “practices”. Christian practices do not happen in a vacuum away from institutions, cultures, or policies, but like the axiom for parishes and buildings—*do the buildings serve people or are people serving the buildings?*—a focusing our lens on the practice gives us the opportunity to address what is being done (and/or not done).

One of the things I think is helpful for a conversation about the future of our grandkids church is the repetitive component of Christian practices. If a practice is repetitive, e.g., making a grandparent’s cookie recipe, change is requisite in order to maintain a repetition of the practice. I used the wrong chocolate chips last time, or the water temperature from the faucet was too warm. To keep doing anything in our lives, we make changes, usually very small ones. Farming today is still farming, but there have been significant changes. John Deere tractors come with air conditioning now, let alone GPS-enabled drones for marking the precise location of each seed planted. In order to farm today, there have had to be changes to the practice of farming from 20 years ago, let alone 50 years ago. “We’ve always done it that way,” is less an epitaph of a dying parish or congregation and more the words of a ghost of a “practice” that is not practicing anymore.

On the church side of change for continuity in and around Christian practices, this squarely hits the institutional church, including but not limited to parishes. Young Americans, including young Catholics, have little to no trust in traditional institutions, e.g., the three branches of government, schools, large businesses or corporations. The “Catholic” elements which are part of the “brand” of the institutional church do not bode well with young adults. Thriving Catholic parishes are described as being “different” or “more welcoming” than the impression of a Catholic parish for young adults. There is an oppositional component here, probably more pronounced in the current TLM-movement. But to return to the four qualities of Christian practices: communal, repetitive, God’s presence, and fundamental human needs, there is not a restriction of only certain locations, institutions, or ordained/gender restrictions on leadership, participation, or degrees of engagement.<sup>18</sup> Our Christian practices continue or persist precisely

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<sup>17</sup> Bass and Dykstra, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practice,” chap. 2, Kindle.

<sup>18</sup> Communion ecclesiology necessarily correlates with Christian Practical Theology for a specific reason on the degrees of participation or engagement.



because they change around these three axes: things done together over time, in response and in light of God's presence, and in an attempt to address fundamental (human) needs.

In light of changes in the U.S. Catholic Church and changes in the U.S., an emphasis on Christian practices, I think, provides a way to focus on continuity in the midst of changes. At the same time, the first quality of Christian practices from Dykstra and Bass—things done together—provide a window to combat the isolationism and heresy of American individualism while also providing an incredible opportunity at this moment in this church—a multicultural and intergenerational community that grows together by doing something together. A simple maintenance model does not address a community of today or tomorrow, though it may address a community of yesterday or yesteryear. A maintenance model closes the window to focus on the “doing” of something. If the most important thing for a parish is keeping the doors open, what happens inside the doors is secondary at best, if not wholly irrelevant.

To summarize the current moment, there are a few points. (1) The number of parishes is somewhat stable, declining in some regions and exploding in other regions. (2) The number of clergy is declining but corresponds effectively to the number of sacraments celebrated. (3) Excluding parishes, Catholic institutions parishes are thriving—hospitals, schools, universities. At the same time, the Catholic hospitals, schools, and universities struggling are in the same boat as other institutions or neighborhoods in the U.S. For example, “inner city,” i.e., poor, Catholic schools serving non-White communities are struggling or closing. (4) The Church and the country is diversifying rapidly. (5) Leadership in the U.S. Catholic Church, from the perspective of the mitre and crosier, is struggling to meet this diversity and to meet the challenges after the sex abuse crisis from Boston 2002 forward. (6) Leadership in the U.S. Catholic Church, from the perspective of lay leadership at thriving Catholic institutions, is effective and ushering in a different angle of authority in the U.S. Catholic Church.

If these trajectories hold, will this be the Church of our grandkids? If we can expand our view of what counts to be Catholic or to be in the Church, yes. Bill McNamara is right at the beginning that we need to talk about Catholicisms and not Catholicism. If we can be open to the diversity of how to be a part of the Church and how to respond to fundamental (human) needs in our midst, the Church will not only persist but will thrive.