

THE HOME:
A
Catholic
SUBCULTURE
That Makes a Difference
 By Justin Bartkus

Is there such a thing as Catholic culture in America anymore? And if there is, is it capable of producing religiously committed Catholics across generations? Or would we have to consider it simply a fading vestige of ethnic or familial identity? From John Paul II to Benedict XVI to Francis, the renewal of Catholic culture in Western societies has been considered an intrinsic dimension of the New Evangelization. With regard to a so-called “Catholic culture,” however, the movement from ideal to real—from exhortations to concrete renewal—is sobering and presents many practical questions. Are there any social mechanisms by which new generations of Catholics can acquire a strong sense of Catholic identity, an entire worldview animated by Christian intuitions regarding humanity and society, and the will to remain committed to these principles over the long term? Can such reinvigoration occur anywhere at an appreciable *scale*?

Christian Smith’s NSYR and the Centrality of Parents

If Dr. Christian Smith, a prominent sociologist of religion at Notre Dame, is correct, any reply to these questions must take special account of one institution: the household, with its deep interpersonal bonds, its wealth of practices, and its highly compelling power to impart identity. In his landmark National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), Smith studied the specific religiosity and spirituality of millennials, observing the widespread drift of these young people from any substantial notion of religious identity or practice. However, he *also* realized that the religious outcomes of these young people were not at all a generational anomaly. Rather, the single greatest predictor of emerging adults’ eventual level of religious commitment was the religiosity of their parents.

Consider that, of the most religious quartile of NSYR young adults ages 24-29 (individuals whose religious attitudes Smith had been tracking since high school) an impressive 82% had parents who reported each of the following: that their family regularly talked about religious topics in the home, that faith was “very important” to them, and that they themselves regularly were involved

in religious activities. By comparison, only 1% of the least religious quartile of Smith’s young adults had parents who reported this combination of religious attitudes and practices. Thus, according to the NSYR, the single most decisive difference between Millennials who remained religiously committed into adulthood and those who didn’t was *the degree of religiousness exhibited by their parents*.

A New Study on Religious Parenting in America

In lieu of this definitive finding, Smith has been laboring for the past three years over a new project aiming to get a social snapshot of the shape and texture of the American religious household. The questions Smith pursued were these: do American parents tend to have religious aspirations for their children? If so, how serious are these goals? How do they conceive of them and talk about them? How do they go about pursuing these goals within the broader context of family life and its array of pursuits? Additionally, Smith sought to understand what sorts of attitudes, practices, and configurations of family life promised better chances of effective religious transmission than others. Towards these ends, Smith and his research team conducted 245 interviews of parents in 145 different households of varying religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, geographical location, religious commitment level, and family type. The data included an oversample of 73 Catholic interviews made possible by funding from the Notre Dame Institute for Church Life. As one of Smith’s graduate researchers, I conducted roughly a quarter of these 73 interviews and have spent the last year analyzing them.

From “Parents Who Are Religious” to “Religious Parenting”

What did we see? Naturally, we witnessed Catholic families distributed all across the spectrum from religiously uncommitted to religiously enthusiastic, from families whose children were obviously in the process of drift out of the Church to those whose children showed encouraging or even definitive signs of permanent adoption of Catholic identity.

The decisive criterion between these latter two categories, however, was not simply whether parents were religiously devout or practicing, but rather *whether they considered living Catholicly and forming their children religiously to be central dimensions of their general task of parenting*. For parents who held this belief, Catholic faith was not something their family occasionally “did,” but who they *were*. Nor was religion a vesture of ethnic or ancestral identity merely to be outwardly observed while remaining interiorly unconsidered, as if the fostering of such engagement in their children could be “outsourced” to clergy, CCD instructors, youth ministers, or other religious professionals. Rather, parents were generally the falling or rising point of their children’s own prospects for observing an adult faith. They were not simply an occasion for exposure to the Church or a mere bridge to the life of the Church; rather, from the perspective of children, they were the only face of the Church that initially seemed to matter. Without effective parents, CCD seemed irrelevant to children, going to Mass a burden, and Catholic doctrine a dead letter. The whole apparatus of Catholicism was met by such children with a shrug.

Why is the household so important? It is in the home that, amidst a world of vast ideological and religious pluralism, of unlimited consumer choices and lifestyles, children receive a definitive orientation to the world and specific values for navigating it. The diminishment of ethnic and neighborhood Catholicism over the last fifty years has now caused the home, a relatively more isolated entity, to become *the* dominant religious subculture amid the current conditions. The home is the crucible where religious identity is primarily cultivated – or neglected. Whether they realize it or not, parents have been thrust center stage. When it came specifically to religion, we saw that parental influence, whether for good or for ill, exhibited a remarkable staying power with children as they entered young adulthood.

Is there not something a bit Pollyanna about this? Is it too optimistic? What about the skepticism and rebelliousness against the beliefs of the elder generation which notoriously characterize adolescence? There is a kernel of truth to such objections – it seems that teenagers and emerging adults indeed have a keen eye for religious authenticity, that they will simply discard inherited belief systems which do not appear coherent, convincing, or beneficial to their own or their family’s lives. However if Catholicism becomes a profound dimension of children’s inbred identity and habitual manner of encountering the world, it becomes increasingly unlikely that they would be able to exit Catholicism without ever engaging it seriously. In this way, parents can genuinely hope to avoid the depressingly common and automatic process of adolescent religious drift.

Essential Practices of a Thriving Domestic Subculture

What concretely did successful homes look like? Mention must be made of two specific kinds of practices: first, those concerning religious *content*, and second, practices of religious *conversation*. Though there exists no silver bullet guaranteeing that a child will remain Catholic, these practices were demonstrably effective in producing domestic cultures where we observed signs of real religious replication.

By “religious content” we refer broadly to any activities, relationships, or experiences inside or outside the home that bear obvious religious connotation: regular familial observance of table grace or bedtime prayers; children’s attendance of Vacation Bible School or voluntarism as altar servers or choir members; or regular relationships with religiously exemplary grandparents or invitations of the parish priest to dinner. Instances of religious content could be infinitely multiplied: pilgrimages, mission trips, attendance at Catholic school, the display of visible religious art in the home, rosaries on road trips, visits to the local soup kitchen, and so forth.

Against the backdrop of a largely secular mainstream, such content *culturally surrounds and embeds children within a coherent and comprehensively Catholic world*. To put it simply, the more Catholic “stuff” to which children are exposed, the less likely they are to be able to envision their lives in isolation from the practices and relationships that being Catholic entails. The regular exposure to such practices and the family’s long-term dedication to them is the most effective way to guarantee their relevance to an emerging adult’s fundamental decisions about which values and obligations to prioritize in their lives. Furthermore, the family’s collective commitment to such practices *cements the bonds between family members* and also *clarifies the intimate values which animate and suffuse those bonds*. It is desirable that the love which joins members of the Catholic family together be inseparable from the religious dimension of the family’s communal life. In such cases, any potential departure of young people from the Catholic faith will be a serious and considered matter, rather than an unwittingly accomplished affair.

Secondly, effective Catholic parents tended to engage their children frequently in practices of religious conversation. This took many forms: brunch table discussions of the Sunday homily, willingness to entertain a doubt or question that had arisen from a child’s religion homework, or weekly harangues about getting out of bed for Mass and the importance of the family’s going to church. Catholic households that generated religiously engaged children tended to exhibit a habit of such religiously oriented chatter. Why? We are not certain, but it is apparent that the habits and content of a family’s conversation reveal much about what lies at the forefront of its communal consciousness and

deliberation—a household in which religion is discussed openly and frequently is a household in which religion is neither compartmentalized nor swept under the rug out of awkwardness.

Parents' Preeminence Does Not Imply Institutions' Irrelevance

One last thing must be made clear: for all that has been claimed here about the newfound centrality of parents as the cultural hinge upon which the transmission of Catholic faith swings, in no way should this be taken to mean that religious institutions – especially Catholic schools, the parish, and clergy—have receded into the background. Without these declining in significance, it is simply that parents who are alert and dedicated to their vital role in the religious formation of their children are the condition without which institutional Catholic influences cannot achieve their effect. It remains true that it takes a religious village to raise a Catholic child. To illustrate, the majority of families, who we spoke to, greatly value the parish priest as role model, teacher, and ongoing religious reference point for their children. Though Catholic institutions are no longer the culturally authoritative intergenerational carriers of the faith they once were, they remain theologically central and socially necessary to Catholic family life. Such institutions provide the single most important environment outside the home in which children come to realize how Catholicism is relationally, actively, and sacramentally lived. It is a crucial task of religious parenting to ensure that children are active participants in the life of the local Catholic community and that the respective vitalities of parish and home are mutually interpenetrating.

Conclusion: Reaching out to Well-Intentioned Parents

To return to our initial question, whether there anywhere exists a Catholic subculture sufficiently vibrant to produce new generations of committed Catholics on an appreciable scale, we answer, “Yes: the Catholic home.” The degree to which this is true depends upon whether parents are intent upon and dedicated to constructing such a culture in their households. We must not underestimate the power of the family to leave a profound religious impression on children, one that lasts into adulthood. Such influence is proven to be a key ingredient that remains in the mix of factors determining whether emerging adults choose to commit



to religious practice over the long term. For millennials and post-millennials, religious drift is not an inevitable outcome, nor is an extraordinary restructuring of the average parish necessary in order for family life to provide a rich religious milieu in which children receive sufficient initiation into the Christian way of life. We found incredibly vibrant Catholic families in sup-

posedly “dying” parishes, just as we found lukewarm and drifting families in the midst of vigorous “mega-parishes.” Though uncommonly dynamic parishes can certainly galvanize large numbers of Catholic households, they are not absolutely required, since it is *parents* who are the decisive agents. The notion of a trickle-down effect from parish to home which sees expansion of parish programming as the key to reaching children can be misleading. A devoted family committed to a modest but dependable parish in many cases can do just as well.

The next task, however, is to make sure Catholic parents understand just how high they have to jump in order to clear the bar that our largely secular society has set for them. Over and beyond those exceptional families who are clearly excelling in the transmission of their faith, we witnessed a much larger and unsettled middle group: those parents who valued their faith, intended to transmit it, but hadn’t fully realized or embraced the gravity of their role – and who lamented their children drifting slowly away from the Church when it almost inevitably occurred. If such parents can be engaged, informed, and empowered, the star of the next Catholic generation may shine a bit more brightly. As the unprecedented number of ex-Catholics among young people continues to rise, we realize that these are difficult and daunting tasks. However, they are certainly not without hope of success.

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