Online Pre-Evangelization

Online Pre-Evangelization:

Disposing People to Hear the Gospel

By

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INTRODUCTION

Those who identify as "nothing in particular" are the fastest-growing "religious" group in the United States. Fewer than half of Americans are now members of a house of worship, and the rate of religious disaffiliation is even higher among young adults.[1] Additionally, as Pope Francis has emphasized, "*Christendom no longer exists*."[2] There is neither the newness of Christianity of the pre-Christendom era, nor the familiarity with the faith that was common until recent decades. We live in a secular age. People have options and vote with their feet. If they do not find life in a church, people will go elsewhere. Many young people have never had a regular church practice.

Young adults are in many ways the hardest group for the Church to reach, at least with in-person initiatives. They are past the stage of children's religious education or a Catholic high school. Only a small minority attend a Catholic institution of higher education. Marriage and parenthood can help to spur some people to go back to church, but most Americans in their twenties have not reached those milestones.

The challenges for the Church are deeper than young people not showing up on Sunday. There has been much talk in recent years about how many Catholics are *sacramentalized* but not *evangelized.* They may have gone through the sacraments of initiation but never really encountered Jesus Christ. This does not even tell the full story. Many have not even been *pre*-evangelized. Religious indifference runs rampant. Most emerging adults have low rates of trust in institutions and do not see the Church as a source of truth, goodness, and beauty. A recent study on young adults leaving the Catholic Church found that the median age at which they stopped identifying as Catholic was thirteen.[3] When they are dropping out at the age of thirteen, they were never really in. They may be aware of some basic tenets of Christianity, but what they have heard has not touched them personally. A desire for Christ has not been kindled.

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[1] J. JONES, «U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time».
[2] POPE FRANCIS, «Christmas Greetings of the Holy Father to the Roman Curia 2019», italics in original.
[3] N. WOLFRAM SMITH, «Study Shows Young Adults Leaving Church Start Down That Path at Age 13».

Much of the talk of evangelization presumes an interest in God and the Church that is often lacking among those the Church wants to reach. In a secular age, faith is *an* option, but it is often not a live option.

Something needs to change. We cannot simply wait around for those lacking curiosity in the Christian life to show up at a parish. The Church must go to them. Pope Francis dreams of a "Church which goes forth" and invites missionary disciples to be bold in the work of "rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization."[4]

Many efforts at evangelization will remain ineffective at reaching most religious "nones" without significant preparation, or "pre-evangelization." Various elements of contemporary culture block people's receptiveness to the Gospel. Pope Paul VI writes in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that "there is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed."[5] Still, if the soil is not prepared, much of that proclamation will fail to produce fruit. This is not about watering down the Good News but about giving the unchurched an on-ramp. Many are not ready for "solid food." In a situation of widespread religious indifference and distrust of institutions, witnesses must strive to facilitate experiences of wonder, create a sense of belonging, and provoke a desire for something more.

New media play an important role in this effort. We inhabit an increasingly digital reality. The content we consume shapes our desires. When the vast majority of young adults are not showing up to church with any sort of regularity, new media are an important part of a strategy for evangelization that would reach everyone. Using the digital highway is an important avenue for reaching the many who are not coming to us.

There is no simple solution. All trends indicate that the nonreligious will continue to grow in the foreseeable future. There are fewer entry points for sharing the Good News when the message does not seem particularly newsworthy. The world is noisy, especially online. The Church cannot assume that people will care about or even notice its efforts to evangelize.

Still, the Church must strive to share the Gospel in the situation in which it finds itself. God provides the growth, but missionary disciples are responsible for planting and watering. This book will explore ways the Catholic Church can use new media to prepare the way of the Lord and make efforts at evangelization more likely to take root.

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[4] POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24; 33.
[5] POPE PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22.

This work will focus on how the Catholic Church can use new media for the pre-evangelization of emerging adults in the United States. "New media" refers to media that use digital technology for distribution and typically involve interactivity. Examples include social media networks, podcasts, and websites. "Pre-evangelization" refers to a stage of preparation for evangelization. While the focus of evangelization is the kerygma, there is often a need for preparation so that people will be more likely to receive the Gospel message. "Emerging adulthood" refers to the stage of life roughly between the ages of 18 and 29 that is different from both adolescence and full adulthood. Young people today often reach milestones associated with adulthood at a later age, especially marriage and parenthood. Two characteristics of today's emerging adults particularly relevant to this study are high rates of religious disaffiliation and the experience of being "digital natives." This work will focus on the context of the United States, though emerging adulthood and religious disaffiliation are not unique to the United States. This book comprises six chapters.

Chapter I: After Christendom

The first chapter will look at the implications of living in a post-Christendom context. Christians continue to practice their faith, but the Church no longer has the prominent position in society it once had. The sociopolitical formation that we call Christendom is no more. One cannot presume that an interlocutor understands the Christian story, nor point to the Bible or Church teaching as authoritative sources in the public realm.

The Church's movement from the center of culture to the periphery has significant implications for evangelization. Previous methods for transmitting the faith do not have the same effect when the cultural landscape has shifted. The Church cannot simply expect people to come to us. Waiting to extend hospitality to those who show up at the church door is insufficient. The Church cannot impose its will in a post-Christendom context. It can only propose.

There is a recognition in Church documents that we must adjust to a changed situation, but the Church is still rethinking its efforts at evangelization in our current context. Christians have responded to this changed reality in different ways, though not all responses have been equally helpful. Maintaining a clear identity is critical both to remain faithful to the call of Christ and to survive in a post-Christendom environment, but a common temptation is to slip into sectarianism or even paranoia. Others may try to downplay aspects of Church teaching and practice to make it more palatable to the wider culture but lose some of the

beauty of the Gospel in the process. The Church often fails to reach many young people in a meaningful way.

The Church needs to build bridges to the unchurched while remaining faithful to the Gospel. The Church must adapt its language and methods in an effort to reach everyone but without losing what is gripping. Striving to be joyful messengers of challenging proposals holds together this necessary tension and illustrates the need for winsome witness that goes out of the sanctuary. While there is a weakness in the Church's position in the contemporary landscape, this opening chapter will describe how the Church can still be an active, creative minority.

Chapter II: Faith as an Option for Emerging Adults

The second chapter will describe the life stage of "emerging adulthood" and the particular experience of emerging adults in the United States today. Emerging adults differ in important ways both from adolescents and from more established adults. Young people are getting married and having children at a later age—if at all. Digital technology has also significantly shaped the experience of today's emerging adults. They have been digitally connected for much of their lives, but they frequently lack deep human connection with others. They are often atomized and distracted. Many feel a lack of meaning. They are also dealing with unprecedented rates of anxiety and depression.

Many of these issues facing emerging adults today have significant implications for their faith lives. Religion has become pluralized. Many different forms of belief and practice coexist alongside each other. People have options, including the option of non-faith. The internet further facilitates the development of idiosyncratic beliefs and practices.

Many emerging adults are religious "nones," though there are important differences between atheists and those who say they are "nothing in particular." While many still believe in a higher power, spirituality has become "unbundled" and not a significant part of their daily lives. One could describe significant numbers of Americans as "spiritual but not religious," but increasingly, American young people are less religious and less spiritual. Declines in participation and trust are not unique to religious institutions in the United States, though churches face particular challenges. Many members of Generation Z had little or no religious formation. The Church cannot assume that young people will come back, particularly when they were never really active in the Church in the first place.

Chapter III: A Need for Pre-Evangelization

The gulf between the Church and most emerging adults is vast. The very dispositions of the heart necessary for receiving the Gospel are often absent. How the Church evangelizes must take into account just how far away most emerging adults are from the Church and how widespread the religious apathy of our present age is. To be able to reach those who lack the very dispositions of the heart to receive the Gospel message, the Church needs to start further back and first prepare the ground for evangelization. To build the necessary trust, curiosity, and openness such that one could embrace the Good News, there is a need for "pre-evangelization."

One can find the term "pre-evangelization" in ecclesial documents, but the concept and practice have been underdeveloped, particularly considering the breakdown in the cultural preconditions that previously supported the transmission of faith. This chapter will describe pre-evangelization as "already and not yet" evangelization. Wordless witness is a form of evangelization, at least in its initial stage, but there is an incompleteness to evangelization that does not include proclamation.

The second half of this chapter will describe various elements of this work of preparation for sharing the Gospel. In addition to highlighting the centrality of witnessing, this chapter will look at the actual practices of pre-evangelization and describe the dispositions to be cultivated in the evangelized. Those hoping to share the Good News must go beyond church property and get to know the people they want to reach. There is a need to maintain the heritage of faith while articulating that tradition in new ways, being sensitive to the issues that can influence how people hear the message we hope to share. People's resistance to the Christian life is often more foundational than intellectual objections. By awakening to their heart's desires, growing in curiosity, and developing a sense of trust, people may be able to receive the gift of faith. Pre-evangelization is not an instant solution. Rather, it is a process of patiently tilling the soil for the seed of faith.

Chapter IV: The Church, New Media, and Digital Reality

Before offering a proposal for what using new media for pre-evangelization could look like, it is necessary to understand digital reality and the implications for the Church. We do not simply use digital tools; we inhabit a digital culture that is marked by interactivity. The lines

between the virtual and the real have blurred. Just because an interaction happens via a digital medium does not make it any less real.

The emergence of new media influences the post-Christendom reality and the changing experience of emerging adults. New media have also shaped people's religious and spiritual lives and the ways they relate to the Church. The decline in church membership in the United States has largely taken place in the period after the widespread adoption of the internet. New media have also broadened the possibilities of who is seen as a religious authority and influenced the very message the Church hopes to share.

After highlighting some distinctive features of digital media, the fourth chapter will focus on how the Church has reflected on the emergence of new media thus far and how the Church ought to continue to respond to our contemporary digital reality. The Church must compete for people's limited attention and try to offer something of value in the rowdy social media landscape. The Church participates in our digital reality but cannot control the online arena. Social media algorithms do not give Church content special treatment because of 2,000 years of history. While the Church must not fail to take an active presence in our digital reality to prepare the way for the Lord, the Church must also be aware of the more concerning aspects of the digital landscape.

Chapter V: Online Witnesses

Witnessing online is a necessary path forward when no one should be excluded from the joy of the Gospel. When young people spend much of their time online and when the great majority of emerging adults are not showing up on Sunday, new media provide critical avenues to reach them. After establishing the need for pre-evangelization and after describing the new media reality in which the Church labors, the fifth chapter will then focus on online pre-evangelization and how Christians may witness to their faith in the digital world.

Much in the Church's life is best or only done offline, but online tools are often strong in areas where parishes are weak. With its potential for reaching the masses, and when most of the nones are not going to church, new media are an important part of the effort to reach people today. Digital media have reduced some of the "barriers to entry" for evangelization. There is space for experimentation that can facilitate the effort to move beyond "business as usual." New media offer opportunities not only to broadcast content but also to witness online. People's desires need to be kindled, and

the online environment plays a significant role in shaping the imagination today.

People have unlimited options for the content they consume. The Church cannot simply expect that people will come to us or be interested in what we have to say. The Church has to offer value and capture people's attention. The work of online witnessing also requires an integration into the culture of digital media. This online witnessing creates an opportunity to be a listening Church, but traveling down the digital highway will lead the Church to be "bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets."[6]

This chapter will also look at who might serve as these online witnesses. While there is space for priests and religious to use digital tools to proclaim the Gospel, there is a particular need and opportunity for the laity to realize their call to mission. Young people play a particularly important role in witnessing to their fellow emerging adults.

Chapter VI: Online On-Ramps for the Gospel

The final chapter will examine what this work of online pre-evangelization could look like today. Searching for "seeds of the Word" is a relevant part of the Church's missionary tradition for a contemporary post-Christendom context in which those seeds are often scattered among thorns. This chapter will look at some people of depth outside of ecclesial silos who are using new media to point in some way to "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just."[7] There is much online that needs to be purified by the light of the Gospel, but amid the social media cacophony, substantive conversations are taking place that are attracting millions of young people. There is often a significant overlap between those who participate in such conversations and the very people the Church hopes to reach with the Gospel.

The many signs of people's dissatisfaction today indicate that there is an opportunity for the Church to show that another way is possible, though one cannot assume that people will turn to the Church for answers to their problems. The Church has a robust new media presence but has too often ignored this work of pre-evangelization and failed to engage the nones online. The Church must build on-ramps to the Gospel.

This final chapter will highlight different elements of the Christian tradition that respond to the situation of emerging adults today and that could be particularly valuable in this work of preparation for the Gospel.

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[6] POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49.

[7] Phil 4:8.

While the possibility of encountering God is not limited to a particular topic or space, there are avenues that are more likely than others to facilitate that encounter. It is important to look for areas of the Church's expertise that relate to people's interests and that could serve as preparation for the Gospel message. Magisterial documents in recent decades have repeatedly highlighted the evangelical value of the *via pulchritudinis*, the way of beauty. The themes of meaning, wisdom, happiness, and death also relate to fundamental human questions that could serve as promising avenues for reaching unchurched emerging adults online. Such access points could respond to the needs of emerging adults and prepare the ground so that people will be more likely to accept an invitation to participate in an embodied community.

PART I: SEE

CHAPTER I

AFTER CHRISTENDOM

This chapter will examine the post-Christendom context of the United States. In many places historically shaped by Christian beliefs and institutions, the Church no longer has the prominent position in society it once had. While there are still many practicing Christians, the Church has largely moved from the center of culture to the periphery. One cannot assume that fellow citizens hold many of the same background beliefs and practices. Many people neither go to church with any sort of regularity nor look to the Church for direction on how to live. Being a Christian can even be a social liability.

The Church's movement away from the center of culture has significant implications for evangelization. The cultural supports for passing down the faith have largely diminished, and the Church fails to reach significant numbers of young people in any meaningful way. Modern missionary documents have repeatedly pointed to a breakdown in the transmission of the faith. There is still much work to do to find how best to share the Good News in these changed circumstances. The Church cannot simply assume that people will walk through its doors. It must go out to people.

After examining some common but insufficient responses to the new social-religious landscape, this chapter will highlight elements of a positive response to the changed circumstances. The Church needs to recognize its weakened position but without diminishing its activity or creativity. The Church needs to build bridges to the nonreligious while hiding neither the joy nor the challenge of the Gospel. How to do this online will get fleshed out in the subsequent chapters, but this chapter will give an overview of the response. There is a weakness in the Church's position in the contemporary landscape but also an opportunity to be a hope-filled, creative minority.

"Christendom no longer exists"

In telling the Roman Curia, "*Christendom no longer exists,*"[1] Pope Francis recognized that the Church's place in the world had changed. The role of Christian institutions, beliefs, and practices in shaping society has diminished. *Christianity* continues to exist, but the sociopolitical formation that we call Christendom is no more. Church and state no longer have the same co-extensive relationship. The Church has lost much of its prominence. Many other voices are contributing to the cultural conversation—and often drowning out the Church. Stuart Murray describes a post-Christendom culture as that which emerges from a society that has been deeply shaped by the Christian story but when Christian institutions lose influence and when the Christian faith loses coherence.[2] In a Christendom society, a person experienced social benefits from going to church—or scorn because of not going to church. Christianity shaped societal norms and values. Elements of the Christian story were part of everyday life. Churches ministered to people who largely shared basic Christian beliefs from the time of childhood. The Church today no longer guides and orders society as it once did.

While scholars may disagree on when this movement away from Christendom began and on the extent to which our era could be defined as post-Christendom, there is general agreement on the important shifts in the relationship between Church and society in the history of Western Christianity. The first shift began when the Church moved from the periphery to the center of culture. Some have dated this to the Edict of Milan in 313, which gave Christianity legal status in the Roman Empire. While Christianity arrived in different countries at different times—and while there were important differences between Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants—there was a gradual expansion of territories shaped by the Christian story and Christian institutions. The second major shift in Western Christianity has occurred as the Church has lost much of its cultural prominence. While the breakdown of Christendom has looked different in different countries, most date the end of Christendom to the second half of the twentieth century.

Of course, Christendom never existed in many parts of the world. Even in Europe, one might argue that Christendom started dying centuries ago. Certainly, the relationship between Church and state in the modern era was not the same as it was during the Middle Ages. Some have dated the

[1] POPE FRANCIS, «Christmas Greetings of the Holy Father to the Roman Curia 2019», italics in original.
[2] S. MURRAY, *Post-Christendom*, 21.

end of Christendom to the Age of Enlightenment or the French Revolution. Another turning point was the First World War, when ostensibly Christian countries fought each other, resulting in the deaths of millions of soldiers and civilians. Changes have been underway for centuries. Christendom no longer exists—and has not for some time.

Still, something significant has changed in more recent decades, and these changes go beyond the percentage of people in a given place who identify as Christian. How people look to the Church—or ignore the Church completely—has shifted. As Pope Francis has said, "We come from a centuries-old pastoral practice, in which the Church has been the single point of reference for culture." But, he continues, "We are no longer in that time… Today we are no longer the only ones who produce culture, nor the first, nor the most listened to."[3] Even in historically Christian countries, the Church has moved from the center of culture to the periphery. Many moral teachings of the Church have been ignored by Christians and non-Christians alike. Many are not interested in what the Church has to say. The Church is no longer the central authority for shaping society that it once was.

Christians may continue to have a presence in the halls of power, but people in the government, academy, media, or business world generally do not look to the Church to shape their institutions. The Christian narrative does not underlie people's assumptions as it once did. One cannot assume widespread understanding of the Christian story, nor point to the authority of Church teaching when making decisions in the public realm. Christian culture today in places like the United States and much of Europe is generally a weak culture. Christians are often divided among themselves. A person's political affiliation or social class may reveal more about his views and practices—and be more formative for his identity—than his religious affiliation.

This work will not attempt to make an evaluation of the merits and demerits of Christendom. It is an attempt to understand our current situation in order to know how best the Church might minister in the changed circumstances of today. The world has changed. Christendom no longer exists. The Church must respond.

Post-Christendom or post-Christian?

While this book uses "post-Christendom" to describe an important aspect of our contemporary context in the West, it is important to note that "post-

[3] POPE FRANCIS, «Address to Participants at the International Pastoral Congress on the World's Big Cities».

Christian" is more widely used in popular discourse. Despite the more widespread use of the term post-Christian, post-Christendom is a better descriptor for our contemporary context. While the percentage of people in the United States who identify as Christian has gone down, roughly two-thirds of Americans are still Christian. It is unhelpful to call a country post-Christian when most of its citizens still identify as Christian. Additionally, even in some other Western contexts in which Christians are no longer the majority, there are still many believing Christians. There is nothing "post" about their Christian faith and practice. If we take a global view, the number of Christians throughout the world has increased. There are more Christians today than ever before. "Post-Christian" does not accurately describe this phenomenon.

"Post-Christian" can also create problems for how people view the past, present, and future. "Post-Christian" connotes a culture that is less Christian than it used to be. That may be the case, but it may not be. And it is certainly difficult to judge. Calling a previous era "Christian" seems to imply that people were more devout than those of a post-Christian era. A previous time may have included a higher percentage of Christians, but it is possible that more of them were lax or passive in their Christianity. Truly living as a disciple is not the same as professing Christianity or being registered in the baptismal book. One can also point to various practices in a previous era that were widely accepted or even engaged in by the Church that we now see as contrary to Christian morality. "Christian" is not the best descriptor for previous eras that may have included much good but that also accepted slavery, justified wars of aggression, and persecuted minorities.

"Post-Christian" is also a charged term. Culture warriors can lament our supposedly post-Christian culture in making the case against a political policy or societal norm. "Post-Christian" gives the impression that the world is hostile to the Gospel. Some Christians face discrimination, but it is not obvious that this is greater today. One can find many examples of Christians facing persecution from other Christians prior to the emergence of so-called post-Christianity. "Post-Christian" also seems to imply a bleak or non-existent future for Christianity. Once a society has become post-Christian, is there hope for Christianity? "Post-Christendom," however, leaves open the possibility for a present and future Christianity but in a changed societal landscape.

"Post-Christendom" more accurately describes the situation in which we find ourselves. Assessing whether a previous era was "more Christian" is a thorny matter, but seeing how the Church has lost its previous cultural dominance is quite evident. Christendom described the close interplay

between the Church and society in certain parts of the world. That particular societal pattern no longer exists, but that does not imply an end to Christianity. Christians preceded Christendom. They have now succeeded Christendom. The Church continues both in societies that were previously defined by Christendom and in societies that were never part of Christendom.

The particularities of the United States context

"Christendom" in an American context has a different history from that of Europe. Some would object to the term being applied to the United States in the first place. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." Still, even if a particular church was never the state religion, Christianity was culturally dominant. Darrell Guder describes the pattern of social structures and norms for much of American history as a "functional Christendom." [4] The history and texture of the relationship between Christian churches and the wider society have been different than in Europe, though the United States had its particular form of Christendom.

For much of the twentieth century, most Americans identified as Christian and were "Christianized" in their thinking. [5] People largely shared background beliefs shaped by Christianity. Most people believed in God, the afterlife, and moral absolutes. American church attendance peaked in the 1950s, when about half of adults attended church on Sunday mornings. The Cold War against the supposedly "godless" Communists also played a factor in the experience of American civil religion. "Under God" was added to the US Pledge of Allegiance in 1954, and the US Congress adopted "In God We Trust" as the country's motto in 1956. Russell Moore notes that for much of the twentieth century, particularly in the South and much of the Midwest, identifying as a Christian was necessary to be considered "normal." [6] He tells the story of an atheist friend in the Bible Belt who asked him for help in finding a good Southern Baptist church but requested "one that's not too, you know, Southern Baptist-y." Moore's friend admitted that he did not believe in God, but said, "I want to go into politics, and I'm never going to be elected to anything in this state if I'm not a church member." [7] Many who were not particularly devout—and some who did not believe—still went to church.

[4] D.L. GUDER, *Missional Church*, 6.
[5] T. KELLER, *Center Church*, 182.
[6] R. MOORE, «Is Christianity Dying?»
[7] R. MOORE, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel*, 1.

This was part of being seen as a responsible adult in many locations for much of the twentieth century.

Many of these dynamics have changed in recent decades. Many Americans still attend church today, but Timothy Keller notes how in the second half of the twentieth century, the culture no longer "tilted" in the direction of traditional Christianity.[8] Blue laws were relaxed in many locations. More businesses started opening on Sunday mornings. Youth sports teams began to host practices and competitions that conflicted with church services. Religious institutions are not privileged in the same way as before.

It has also become much more common in recent decades for people to identify as nonreligious—and for others to see them as "normal" Americans. Russell Moore argues that there are fewer "incognito atheists" and that those who are openly nonreligious can still "find spouses, get jobs, volunteer with the PTA, and even run for office."[9] In addition to the significant rise in the percentage of Americans identifying as nonreligious in recent decades, there has also been greater religious diversity, particularly after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. One can make fewer assumptions about the extent to which fellow residents share one's background beliefs. The American civil religion has also continued to evolve. In President Obama's first inaugural address, for example, he describes the United States as "a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers."[10] There is not just an appeal to "Christian" or "Judeo-Christian" values, but Muslims, Hindus, and even non-believers are mentioned by name. This is no longer the 1950s.

There has been a further shift in recent years. By some indications today, there is not just neutrality with regards to Christian teaching and institutions, but there is negativity towards traditional forms of Christianity. Rather than Christian beliefs and practices being seen as something expected of an upstanding person of society, there can be a social cost to publicly stating one's beliefs. Christian leaders can point to incidents in the United States where people have been punished for holding orthodox Christian beliefs that were widespread only a decade ago. Some have argued that being seen as a Christian is no longer something positive or neutral but that we have entered a "negative world," where Christian morality is seen as a threat to the public good and where being a

[8] T. KELLER, *Center Church*, 182.
[9] R. MOORE, «Is Christianity Dying?»
[10] J. CASANOVA, «Nativist Responses to the Challenge of Migration in Our Global Age», 13.

Christian is disadvantageous.[11] Many Americans associate Evangelical Christianity with a particular brand of politics or the Catholic Church with the sexual abuse of children. Many see Christian teaching regarding sexuality and gender as counter to people's human rights.

These dynamics are magnified by the ways in which many people's views of Christianity are less informed by their personal practice and relationships and more shaped by what they see in the media. In addition to those who have left their childhood faith, there is an increasing number of "native nones" in the United States—those who have never had a religious practice or identity.[12] Additionally, those who openly identify as Christian often constitute a much smaller percentage in many elite spaces. One recent survey of the incoming undergraduate class at Harvard University, for example, found that 46% identified as atheist or agnostic and only 6% said they were Protestant.[13] Daniel Cox writes, "Without personal participation in a religious community, more nonreligious Americans are exposed to religion in its most divisive and least charitable form—in online arguments over politics."[14] While it would be virtually impossible for someone in the United States not to have some exposure to Christians or Christianity, the understanding they gather from the broader culture is often negative.

It is important not to overstate the challenges for churches, but it also important not to ignore the ways in which people's views of Christianity have shifted. Increasing numbers of Americans are religiously unaffiliated, and among the religious "nones," attitudes towards Christianity have become more negative. A 2023 poll found that of religiously unaffiliated Americans, 47% said the United States becoming less religious was a good thing—up from 25% of unaffiliated Americans who expressed the same opinion less than a decade earlier.[15] When asked whether they believe "religion causes problems more than it provides solutions," 69% of those who have left religion and 63% of those who have always been religiously unaffiliated agreed with the statement.[16] The nones are not only more numerous, but they also increasingly have a negative view of religion.

Of course, the United States is a large country. Harvard University is not the University of Mary. Mississippi is not Silicon Valley. The extent to

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[11] A.M. RENN, «The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism».
[12] Cf. T.H. FROMM, *Pre-Evangelization and Young Adult "Native Nones"*.
[13] R. BURGE, «How Weird is The Religious Composition of Harvard's Student Body?»
[14] D.A. COX, «Turning Against Organized Religion».
[15] D.A. COX, «Turning Against Organized Religion».
[16] D.A. COX, «Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America».

which a particular area is a post-Christendom context varies. The social location of Christian churches is different in the Bible Belt than in the Pacific Northwest. Additionally, within the same family, neighborhood, and workplace, there may be committed Christians, cultural Christians, followers of Jesus who have a complicated relationship with the institutional Church, and multiple varieties of religious nones. While the Church has an increasingly peripheral role in American society, there is a wide range of attitudes about the Church and Christianity.

Still in transition

Even in our context that can generally be described as post-Christendom, vestiges of Christendom remain. Timothy Keller has used the language of a "spotty Christendom."[17] One need only pick up American money and read "In God We Trust" or listen to American politicians ending their speeches by saying, "God bless America." A post-Christendom context is not the same as a pre-Christendom context. While the Christian narrative is less central in a society's guiding vision, parts of the story are still significant for individuals and communities. Fragments of Christendom culture remain. Movies and books include Christlike figures and stories of redemption, even if the consumers—or creators—do not notice the similarities with the Christian narrative. People who do not identify with a religion may be fierce defenders of human rights, even if they are unaware of the influence of the Christian tradition on the development of the concept. Cities are still named after saints. Restaurants may feature fish on Fridays. Church holidays populate the calendar. People feel free to abandon the church in which they were raised, but many people still retain ties to the faith of their ancestors.

Additionally, even when there has never been a formal establishment of religion and when the number of Americans no longer identifying with Christianity has risen greatly in recent decades, religion can often intersect with politics in ways in which some could question whether the United States is truly a post-Christendom society. Politicians seek the support of prominent pastors. It is common to hear commentators discuss the "Evangelical vote." More than one-quarter of dechurched Evangelicals said in a survey that the United States should be declared a Christian nation.[18] They no longer attend church, but they still say that they are Christian—

[17] T. KELLER, *How to Reach the West Again*, 4.

[18] J. DAVIS—M.S. GRAHAM—R.P. BURGE, *The Great Dechurching*, 32. They define a «dechurched» person as one who previously went to church at least once per month but currently goes less than once a year.

and think their country should be declared as such. While the social location of the Church has changed significantly, there are some Americans who want to go back to a previous era—and others who fear that things have never really changed.

One of the significant challenges for the Church during this transition period away from Christendom is that many people no longer have a deep familiarity with the Christian narrative. They may *think* they know what Christianity is all about. After all, they live in a country deeply shaped by Christian institutions. Most people in a place like the United States went to church as a child, at least occasionally. In many cases, however, that knowledge may be largely superficial. In one study conducted by the Barna Group, two out of three Americans knew that Easter was a religious holiday, but only 42% of Americans knew that it celebrated Christ's resurrection.[19] A Christian talking about "faith" or "sin" or "salvation" can assume that people have *heard* such terms, but one cannot assume that other people—even fellow people in the pews—understand these terms in the same way.

Even though many people living in a post-Christendom context lack a deep familiarity with the Christian narrative, the remaining Christian "residue" in the culture can also lead people to see Christianity as something outdated or stale. Rather than being seen as bringing "strange notions" for which people "should like to know what these things mean,"[20] the Christian message may be seen as something irrelevant that people left behind in childhood. For the early Church, preaching Christ crucified may have been "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,"[21] but it was not *boring.* The threat of martyrdom was real. People in a post-Christendom context, however, might associate Christianity with their grandparents or items in a museum. It is safer to be a Christian after Christendom than it was before Christendom, but Christianity after Christendom often lacks the *excitement* that was characteristic of the early Church.

This widespread exposure to elements of the Christian story but without a deep immersion in the Christian life has led several scholars to argue that many people in our post-Christendom context have been "inoculated" against Christianity. The general ignorance of Christianity among people in the West, particularly young people who are further removed from the influence of Christendom, means that missionaries in

[19] BARNA GROUP, «Most Americans Consider Easter a Religious Holiday, But Fewer Correctly Identify its Meaning».
[20] Acts 17:20.
[21] 1 Cor 1:23.

the West are in many ways engaging in first evangelization. A key difference with mission *ad gentes*, however, is that in addition to a lack of deep understanding of Christianity, a missionary in a post-Christendom context also faces a "been there, done that" attitude. C.S. Lewis once compared sharing the Gospel with one who had never encountered Christianity to a bachelor trying to attract a young woman, whereas attempting to evangelize in a post-Christendom era was analogous to a man attempting to win back his jaded ex-wife.[22] While there is an element of truth in the oft-quoted line from G.K. Chesterton that the Christian ideal has not been "tried and found wanting" but "found difficult and left untried," many *think* they have tried Christianity. And they do not want it anymore. Even if such people have never gotten to know Jesus Christ and his Church in a deep way, they know *of* Christ and his Church. Christians call it the "Good News"; many non-Christians do not see it as such.

Post-Christendom American Catholicism

Much of what has been discussed in this chapter thus far has been relevant for most Christian churches, but in this larger shift away from Christendom, there have been particularities to the experience of the Catholic Church in the United States. While a diversity of Christian practice has marked the United States from its founding, the United States was largely a Protestant country. Most Catholics' families came to the United States long after the country's founding. Religious identity often overlapped with ethnic identity. Catholics were often seen as outsiders; they were suspect. Even when continued waves of Catholic immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries changed the demographic makeup of the United States to the point that Catholics were larger than any single Protestant denomination, Catholics were still outside of the cultural center. Despite rising economic and educational success, there were few Catholics in the top positions of power before the 1960s. Some Americans even worried that President John F. Kennedy would take his orders from the pope, rather than being loyal to the American people.

Even if their families had been in the United States for generations—and despite conscious attempts to demonstrate their "Americanness"—Catholics were often not seen as fully American. While this created challenges for breaking into the American mainstream, this outsider status helped reinforce Catholic culture and identity. Catholics in America are often held up as an example of how external threats can facilitate a group's

[22] Cited by J.P. SHEA, UNIVERSITY OF MARY, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission*, 8.

internal cohesion. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark describe how the prejudice that American Catholics faced helped unite people of different ethnic backgrounds and pushed them to higher levels of religious commitment.[23] When most Catholics grew up with two Catholic parents, lived in Catholic neighborhoods, went to Catholic schools, and identified with the local parish—and when non-Catholics saw them as outsiders—people had a strong sense of Catholic identity. In a context like the United States in which Catholics were always a minority, not eating meat on Fridays was a distinctive marker of Catholic identity. Catholics were referred to as "fish eaters." It was clear who was Catholic when a group of American teenagers went to McDonald's on a Friday. The American Catholic otherness until the mid-twentieth century fostered Catholic identity, and a distinctive Catholic culture helped pass along the faith.

But US Catholics became as American as apple pie—and Catholic culture more like pie crumbs. Catholics became socially mobile. They moved to the suburbs and became friends with their Protestant neighbors. Catholic children went to public schools, and large numbers of Catholics started going to college. Marrying non-Catholics became common. William Dinges notes the irony of how the widespread tolerance for American Catholics may turn out to be "more lethal to Catholic identity and commitment than intolerance."[24] Broader changes in American culture also influenced Catholics. Changing norms around marriage and the family, the legalization of abortion, and new questions around sexuality affected all religious groups.

These changes in American culture also coincided with ecclesial changes, most especially those resulting from the Second Vatican Council. Not only was the "Catholic ghetto" no more, but now Catholics were going to Mass in English—if they were going at all. Being Catholic no longer *felt* so different. Church architecture and ritual experiences changed. Weekly Mass attendance in the United States peaked in the mid-1950s, when 75% of Catholics reported that they had attended Mass in the past seven days.[25] Sodalities and other Catholic groups declined in membership. Many devotional practices such as Eucharistic processions became less common. While changes in piety are not as easy to measure as the number of baptisms or marriages, part of the breakdown in Catholic culture stemmed from a decline in practices that previously distinguished Catholics from their Protestant brethren. The number of people who say they no longer identify as Catholic has also skyrocketed. While Catholics

[23] R. FINKE—R. STARK, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990*, 44%.
[24] W.D. DINGES, «Our Teens Are Leaving the Church. Why?»
[25] L. SAAD, «Catholics' Church Attendance Resumes Downward Slide».

currently constitute about 21% of the US population, that number has been buoyed by immigration in recent decades, particularly from Latin America. Former Catholics now make up about 13% of the US population.[26]

A power reversal and need to attract

The Church's movement from the center of culture to the periphery changes how it must interact with the wider world. The Church cannot speak and assume people will listen—let alone follow. The Church cannot expect that a government official will legislate according to Church teaching or that the media will cover activities of the Church in a positive light. Appeals to Scripture or papal authority tend not to work outside of a church setting. Moreover, people often resent any attempts by the Church to step out of a narrowly defined religious arena. In addition to facing outright hostility, the Church in a post-Christendom context encounters widespread indifference.

The Church cannot impose its will in a post-Christendom era. It can only invite, knowing full well that people can and frequently do decline the invitation. A post-Christendom Church cannot expect everyone to be a Christian or follow the natural law. It ought to make a case for that which is true and good and beautiful, but with the recognition that many are likely to reject their vision. The Church must show *why* a Christian life is a better life, rather than expect that people will think the Church has something meaningful to say. The Church has no choice but to follow the example of the carpenter from Nazareth who did not force anyone to follow him but who invited people to "come and see."

The marginalization of the Church not only influences how the Church interacts with non-Christians. There has also been a shift of power within the Church itself. We are long past the days when the laity were simply expected to "pray, pay, and obey." The stigma around leaving the Church or identifying as nonreligious has largely vanished. People feel free to leave if they are not finding life. Even among the baptized, many have never had a firmly rooted Christian identity. The defense and propagation of the faith begins at home.

Religious identity has always intersected with family and culture. Even in a mostly post-Christendom context, many feel sentimental ties to the faith of their families. Cultural Christianity may provide the springboard for a personal encounter with Christ, but the Church cannot depend on those familial and cultural ties as sufficient for passing down the faith in a

[26] D. MASCI—G. A SMITH, «7 Facts about American Catholics».

post-Christendom context. The need to invite and attract extends not only to non-Christians. The Church must convince those who already have a connection with the Church. There is no guarantee they will maintain that connection. What worked under Christendom often does not work when Christendom is no more.

This has significant implications for evangelization. Parents who want to raise their children in the Christian faith cannot assume that taking their kids to church for an hour a week or sending them to a Catholic school will be sufficient for inculcating a practice of the faith. Children and adults are bombarded by messages throughout the week that have not been shaped by the Gospel. Raising one's children the way that one's parents or grandparents were raised does not have the same effect when the world has changed. After Christendom, a Christian family must swim against the cultural current. James Mallon writes that in a previous era, "we got away with not making disciples, because the culture propped it all up."[27] The props are now gone. While baptism comes with certain duties, the Church functions like a voluntary association. People feel free to leave—and they do. Religious disaffiliation is common. In some places, it is the norm. One must choose to be Catholic in ways that were not the case in a previous generation. The Church cannot expect people simply to imbibe the faith from their families or neighborhoods. It must evangelize.

A need for change

From popes to the people in the pews, Catholics have noticed the changing cultural landscape and the breakdown in the transmission of the faith in countries previously marked by Christendom. These changes and the consequent need for evangelization have been repeated themes in the missionary documents of the Church since the Second Vatican Council. Pope Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that there was "a very large number" of the baptized who were "entirely indifferent" to their baptism and "not living in accordance with it."[28] Paul VI noticed that something had changed. Not only was there a disconnection between their baptismal call and how they lived, many did not even care. Pope Paul VI was acknowledging the reality of significant numbers of the baptized who were missing from the Church—but often not feeling as if they were missing anything.

Pope John Paul II continued many of these same themes fifteen years later in *Redemptoris Missio.* He acknowledged how, particularly in

[27] J. MALLON, *Divine Renovation*, 6%.
[28] POPE PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 56.

countries shaped by Christian beliefs and institutions, "entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel."[29] Both in *Redemptoris Missio* and in discourses throughout his pontificate, Pope John Paul II articulated the need for a "new evangelization" or "re-evangelization."

Pope Francis paints a similar picture more than two decades later. In his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium,* Pope Francis's thought is shaped by the sheer numbers of those who do not follow Christ. He describes in *Evangelii Gaudium* how "so many" people go without "the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life." Such a fact, he writes, "should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences."[30] Pope Francis acknowledges a breakdown in the way Catholics have passed down—or not—the Christian faith in recent decades. He describes how many people feel disillusioned with the Church and no longer identify as Catholic. Previous ways of sharing the faith are no longer working as they used to. There is much work to do.

The changing world requires a different response from the Church. The Church is no longer in the center of culture; we cannot simply expect people to come to us. As the *Lineamenta* for the Synod on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith states, "Today, a 'business as usual' attitude can no longer be the case."[31] Church models and strategies that worked in a Christendom context do not necessarily work after Christendom.

Pope Francis has often emphasized the need for creative adaptation. Francis dreams of a "missionary option" that is capable of "transforming everything," so that the Church's ways of doing things can be "channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation."[32] This does not mean throwing out all that came before, but it does mean that there will be a need to experiment. For example, particular devotions and practices may not have the same appeal that they had in a previous era. New expressions may need to emerge. Pope Francis notes that ministry exercised in a "missionary key" tries to "abandon the

[29] POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 33.
[30] POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49.
[31] SYNOD OF BISHOPS, «The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith—Lineamenta», 10.
[32] POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 27.

complacent attitude that says: 'We have always done it this way.'"[33] The proclamation of the Gospel today requires creativity.

Still a lot of "business as usual"

Action on the ground has not always reflected the strong calls for boldness, at least in the United States. While there are many creative examples of evangelizing activity in the United States, at least the formal statements from the US Bishops illustrate the challenge of breaking out of a Christendom mindset. The Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has published two significant documents on the New Evangelization since the 2011 call for no more "business as usual": *Disciples Called to Witness* in 2012 and *Living as Missionary Disciples* in 2017. The committee states at the beginning of *Living as Missionary Disciples* that the immediate inspiration for the document was Pope Francis's repeated calls to move ministry strategies from a mindset of maintenance to mission.[34] The document even cites the preparatory document for the Synod on the New Evangelization in saying that "it is no longer time for us as Church to be about 'business as usual.'"[35] However, one still sees some "usual business" in their analysis.

The Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops knows that things have changed. Their stated goal with *Disciples Called to Witness* is to "take up the call of the New Evangelization."[36] Despite acknowledging that the great majority of Catholics—let alone the religiously unaffiliated—are not showing up to the parish on any given Sunday, it is curious to see how the same document describes evangelization vis-à-vis the parish. The document states, "Evangelization must remain rooted in the parish."[37] The document continues, stating for apparent emphasis, "Successful evangelization and catechetical initiatives must be focused on the parish and parish life."[38] Even though most American Catholics are not going to the parish with any sort of regularity, the proposals of *Disciples Called to Witness* are parish focused. It is unclear what ought to be done about the religiously unaffiliated who have no interest in a Catholic parish. This 2012 document

[33] POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 33.
[34] UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS (Hereafter: USCCB), *Living as Missionary Disciples*, 2.
[35] USCCB, *Living as Missionary Disciples*», 8.
[36] USCCB, *Disciples Called To Witness*, 1.
[37] USCCB, *Disciples Called To Witness*, 14.
[38] USCCB, *Disciples Called To Witness*, 14.