

**Building Community with Young Adults:  
Towards the Embodiment of an Ecclesiological Imagination**

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**Abstract**

Research reveals Catholic young adults struggle to find quality mentors and feel a sense of belonging in their faith communities. Pope Francis is urging Catholic ministry leaders to become a more synodal church; a listening church that journeys together to create a more just and compassionate world. Using the qualitative method of practical theology, this essay encourages ministry leaders to reimagine our way of being church by proposing a new ecclesiological imagination capable of recognizing, engaging, and empowering Catholic young adults to live in faith communities of belonging that journey together to build up the common good.

**Introduction**

The 2018 Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment and national and local listening held with affiliated Catholics in their 20s and 30s reveal how young adults feel unwelcomed in the Catholic Church. Many articulate how they struggle to find quality mentors and feel a sense of belonging in their faith communities; meanwhile, research shows that the presence of just one mentor or trusting adult in the lives of young people reduces their feeling of loneliness by half (Packard et al. 2020, 48). Pope Francis is urging ministry leaders to become a more synodal church, one where the people of God journey together as a faith community to create a more just and compassionate world. He encourages faith communities to give young

people access to quality mentors who will accompany them in life and help them become rooted in community (2019, paras. 244, 179). Paul Lakeland takes this further to suggest the church in the third millennium must espouse a “kenotic ecclesiology” or one that expresses a primary “concern for the world beyond the church” (2015 p. 35).

Amidst the challenges facing young adults and those who minister with young adults lie opportunities for ecclesial renewal. Insights from sociology and theology, in particular ecclesiology, point to a new way forward, a way for ministry leaders to respond creatively and faithfully to the signs of our times. This article argues that what ministry leaders need today, in order to create a more inclusive faith community of belonging that welcomes young adults and builds up the common good, is an ability to embody an ecclesiological imagination. An ecclesiological imagination views our way of being church in the world, of creating meaningful communities of belonging that strive to encounter God in others and in God’s creation. Such an imagination enables ministry leaders to rethink evangelization with young adults as a way to go out from our parishes to form relationships with young adults and other community partners as a way to encounter God’s incomprehensible compassion and love in our midst. Developing an ecclesiological imagination has the capacity to illuminate Pope Francis’s theology of synodality and missionary discipleship as embodied practices. In this way, ministry leaders are called to rethink their existing ministries around what it means or can and should mean to be church, to create meaningful communities of belonging that more fully engage young adults as church gathered and church sent in mission, to search for encounters with God in through their relationships with others.

Using the qualitative method of practical theology, this article describes the lived experiences young adults and the current ministry practices found in most Catholic parishes in

the United States, to explore their assumptive ecclesiological worldviews, or ways of being church. This “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 6) allows the researcher to explore in depth the listening sessions held with ministry leaders locally, and the data from national conversations as they relate to sociological studies on young adulthood. The author then unpacks these “theory laden practices” (Browning, 1991, p. 6) using a sociological and theological analysis to propose an ecclesiological imagination capable of engaging and empowering Catholic young adults to live in inclusive faith communities of belonging for the common good.

### **Young Adult Development and Contemporary Culture**

Research shows that affiliated Catholic young adults are looking for meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging (National Dialogue, 2020; Packard et al. 2020; XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2018; Pew Research Center, 2019; Francis 2018). While contemporary young adults, including Generation Z and Millennials, are increasingly disaffiliating from the Catholic Church (Pew Research Center, 2019), there are noteworthy trends in affiliated young adults worth deep consideration. The majority of young adults (ages 18-39) who participated in the National Dialogue<sup>1</sup> and identified as affiliated with the Church report being in search of “a supportive community and a place to belong” while 44% just want “to be accepted for who they are” (Stein, 2020, p. 20). Data from Springtide Research Institute reveals “one in three of our young people” ages 13-25, “feel completely alone much of the time,” (Packard et al., 2020, p.17), yet their research also shows that “participating in

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<sup>1</sup> The National Dialogue is 3-year collaborative initiative aimed at unifying Catholic youth and young adult ministry leaders and organization to understand more fully the lived experience young people and reengage them in the life of the church. From this the NLN developed a conversation guide to engage or re-engage not only young people, the but also the ministry leaders and the parents/guardians of young people through a facilitated dialogue. The author used these resources to train ministry leaders and religious educators to host local conversations in New Orleans, LA in the summer of 2018. Nicholas Stein presented the data from these national conversations to the National Leadership Network (NLN) in July 2020.

religious groups has virtually no protective effect against the experience of loneliness” revealing that “merely participating in a religious community’s activities does not lead to a fuller sense of belonging and diminished feelings of loneliness” (Packard et al., 2020, p.19). What is more, almost half of affiliated young adults from the National Dialogue reported they feel unwelcomed in the church (Stein, 2020, p. 20). These findings raise alarms in ministry leaders committed working with young people. Loneliness and lack of belonging is on the rise in young adults, and our parish programs are doing little to turn the tide.

Young adulthood consists of periods of transition, identity formation, and a search for a faith they can call their own (O’Keefe, 2019; Kegan 1994; Parks, 2000). Theresa O’Keefe notes the process of growing towards young adulthood involves “questions of identity, vocation, purpose, desirability, belonging, and romance...” (p. 5) and the process of discovering one’s self unfolds in the context of meaningful relationships with others (O’Keefe, 2019, pp. 7-8; see also Kegan, 1994; Parks 2000) Access to quality mentors is critical for young adults searching for meaning and belonging. In the Final Document of the 2018 Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment; however, reveals that “many of those who spoke pointed to the shortage of qualified people devoted to accompaniment” (XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2018, para. 9).

I gathered a team of ministry leaders and religious educators to host the National Dialogue with young adults in New Orleans (Lamont, 2019). From these sessions, my team reported similar findings, that the young adults they spoke with, all of whom attended Catholic high school as adolescents, were looking for quality mentors, non-judgmental people they can trust and who could help them in their spiritual journey. While these listening sessions do not point to generalizable trends, they affirm and contextualize the national surveys and statistics

on young adult affiliation. One young adult, for example, said the lowest point in her life was when no one was checking in on her (Lamont, 2019). Comments such as these come from affiliated Catholic young adults who attend mass and want to grow in their spirituality but more often than not experience a church that does not recognize them nor make room for their gifts and talents. Our listening sessions affirmed much of the research on young adult religiosity, the desire to belong, and the need for trusted mentors to accompany them throughout their lives.

Research also shows young adults want to learn how to embody their faith in their everyday lives, that Generation Z in particular want “opportunities to connect their religion and their desire for social change” and hope to find within “their places of worship... opportunities to do so” (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p. 179). Instead, we hear “young people frequently fail to find in our usual programs a response to their concerns, their needs, their problems and issues (Francis, 2018, para 202).

In response to these trend, Pope Francis(2013), in his first exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* encouraged ministry leaders in the United States to rethink what it means to evangelize, or embrace the “new evangelization” particularly with those baptized Catholics who have fallen away from the church- this includes efforts to reach out to young adults. Such efforts, as outlined in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB, 2016) 2017-2020 strategic plan, sought to help ministry leaders become more authentic witnesses of the Gospel in their ministries with youth and young adults and sought to equip ministry leaders with the resources necessary “to go forth” and spread the Good News (USCCB, 2016, p. 13).

Despite these efforts, young adults still struggle to find a place in the church, quality mentors, and guides to help them in their spiritual journey. Instead, many young adults encounter inauthentic Catholic adults in their churches; hypocrites who claim to be Catholic but do not

practice their faith outwardly (Stein, 2020, p, 29). These young adults, contrary to what many ministry leaders believe, report how witnessing hypocritical Catholics is a greater barrier to their faith development than church teachings that conflict with what they believe.

Too often what we find in our parishes are sacramental preparation programs, catechetical classes that aim to prepare young people to receive the sacrament of Confirmation or Marriage with few connections to living a life of faith in the world, beyond the parish. For example, one young adult from our local listening sessions who attended a Catholic high school in her youth stated she wished that she learned how to put their faith into practice, and how to combine psychology and theology, to develop a spiritual life that helped her manage stress and anxiety. Instead, she learned about the history of the Catholic Church, and various doctrinal formulations. Moreover, this style of programming, or schooling does not correlate with greater participation in church life (CARA 2008) as many young people leave the church after receiving Confirmation (McCarty and Vitek 2017). Meanwhile;

The young are constantly called to make decisions that give direction to their lives; they want to be heard, acknowledged and accompanied. Many find that their voice is not considered worthwhile or helpful in social and ecclesial circles. In various situations, little attention is paid to their cry, especially that of the poor and exploited, and there is a lack of adults prepared or willing to listen to them (XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2018, para. 7).

Overall, the needs of young people are great. Many are suffering from increased levels of stress and anxiety and a deep feeling of loneliness and isolation (Packard et al., 2020, O’Keefe 2019). The current COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges as many young adults are now forced to stay at home, many of whom live alone, are out of work, and/or

struggling as they grieve the loss of loved ones infected by the COVID-19 virus which is spreading at a disproportionately alarming rate in communities of color (Godoy and Wood, 2020). Young adult Catholics of African descent are protesting and praying for their lives to matter while many young Hispanic and Latino/a Catholic DACA recipients live in fear of deportation.

Within these challenges are opportunities for greater engagement with young adults through meaningful relationships. Packard et al. (2020) report that “severe loneliness, social, isolation, and stress can be substantially reduced by increasing the number of connections young people have to trusted adults” (p. 59). This would include mentoring, people committed to helping young adults develop their identities and spiritualities, that form a small community that cares and that one can go to for help. O’Keefe (2019) calls these “robust relationships...[or] relationships wherein you are known well and loved fully” (p. 67). Many young adult ministers are natural mentors capable of forming such “robust relationships,” but this is not the task for one minister alone, this is a project to be taken up by a community of people committed to nurturing the faith lives of young adults. Pope Francis (2013) would call this a community of “missionary disciples” where the people of God “boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy” (para. 24).

Pope Francis is keenly aware of these and other challenging realities facing young adults, and urges ministry leaders to create “projects that can strengthen them, accompany them and impel them to encounter others, to engage in generous service, in mission” (Francis, 2018 para. 30). This work, the work of building up God’s kingdom in the world, must be done through a

communal spirit of synodality. In his post-synodal exhortation *Christus Vivit*, Francis (2019) writes:

Youth [and young adult] ministry has to be synodal; it should involve a “journeying together” that values “the charisms that the Spirit bestows in accordance with the vocation and role of each of the Church’s members, through a process of co-responsibility... Motivated by this spirit, we can move towards a participatory and co-responsible Church, one capable of appreciating its own rich variety, gratefully accepting the contributions of the lay faithful, including young people and women, consecrated persons, as well as groups, associations and movements. No one should be excluded or exclude themselves. In this way, by learning from one another, we can better reflect that wonderful multi-faceted reality that Christ’s Church is meant to be. (Francis, 2019, paras. 206-207)

Pope Francis invites ministry leaders and religious educators to reimagine church with and for young people. However, there remains a gap between Pope Francis’ vision of church and the realities young adults are experiencing in their faith communities. The pastoral care of young adults is great. How can the Church respond?

### **The New Evangelization: Understanding Church as Gathered and Sent**

Part and parcel to our Catholic ecclesiology is evangelization (see Paul VI, 1975, para. 60), or the “New Evangelization,” a term used by Pope John Paul II, and later developed by both Pope Benedict XVI, in calling a “Synod on the New Evangelization” in 2010, and Pope Francis, most notably in his *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013). Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* serves as inspiration for a New Evangelization. In it, he describes how the mission of the church is to bring the light of Christ to non-Christians, but it is just as important to recognize that “there



is a very large number of baptized people who for the most part have not formally renounced their Baptism but who are entirely indifferent to it and not living in accordance with it” (Paul VI, 1975, para. 56). The New Evangelization, therefore, is an effort to re-engage those baptized Catholics who have fallen away from the church to ensure Christ continues to be present in the world, in the building up of the kin-dom of God.

Steven Bevans (2015), tracing the history of the New Evangelization, describes Pope Benedict XVI’s emphasis was on proclaiming the Gospel unapologetically with “ardor” or “boldness” (p. 8). Some Synod Fathers pushed back on this approach during the Synod, suggesting the Church should adopt “a new attitude of humility, gentleness, and listening” (Bevans, 2015, p. 8), “calling for the church to listen first before speaking” (Bevans, 2015, p. 9). Pope Francis carries this posture of openness and dialogue through papacy in his discussion of “Missionary Discipleship” (2013, para. 24). Recognizing early on that “young people often fail to find responses to their concerns, needs, problems and hurts in the usual structures” (2013 para 105), Francis (2013) writes:

We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders.” (para 171)

What began as an effort to boldly reignite the faith of fallen-away Catholics under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI became a method of listening and accompaniment under Pope Francis.

From three different popes, however, we can trace three different approaches to evangelization and how to be church in the United States. Paul Lakeland (2015) describes these influences as three distinct types of apostolicity. The first is a “apostolicity of maintenance” or the “build it and they will come” (p. 26) approach to ministry and evangelization which advocates for the fervent upholding of doctrine as a way to preserve the apostolic roots and pass this doctrine on to the next generation. The second ecclesiology is “the church of the New Evangelization” which focuses on the dwindling participation in church life, such as those parents who want their children baptized, but do not come to mass (Lakeland, 2015, p.33). The way of being church in this model focuses on renewing or deepening the faith of those who are less than active or just “checking the boxes.” To this Lakeland (2015) makes an astute point:

...the new evangelization movement seems to have little sense that its message need be any different from that of the old evangelization. “New” seems largely to mean a new attempt, rather than an attempt to do anything new. (p. 34)

What we have instead, argues Lakeland (2015), is a “remedial evangelization” that focuses more on parishioners with little attention to the “world beyond the church” (p. 35). Implicit in the ecclesiology behind the new evangelization is how it ignores Vatican II’s emphasis on dialogue and implicitly presumes to bring Christ to others, all the while failing to see that God is already present in others.

From this understanding, is a third ecclesiology emerges which Lakeland (2015) calls a “kenotic ecclesiology,” or “the theological commitment of a humble, de-centered church (p. 36). This way of being church “understands concern for the world beyond the church to be the primary if not exclusive meaning of apostolicity” that engages in “an evangelical dialogue...in which the church does not simply bring the grace of God to the secular worlds, but also finds it

there waiting for us” (Lakeland, 2015, p. 35). Lakeland’s argument illuminates for ministry leaders the often quoted phrase “meet people where they are.” It is through a posture of listening and dialogue that we see how God is active in the lives of those we meet and in the world more broadly. Such openness to God’s presence also allows us to see a fuller range of diversity inherent in all God’s creation.

### **Encountering God Through Others**

Adding to this analysis, Richard Gaillardetz (2008), in his *Ecclesiology for a global church*, offers a thick description of how the Catholic church has and continues to live into its mission as a people of God, both gathered and send. He argues that it is from our catholicity (or being attentive to the whole) that we come to understand more fully the beauty and splendor inherent in our way of being church, that our “vision of the church can be enriched by a greater awareness of the diversity of its inculturated forms flourishing in the world today” (2008, p. xix). Through what Gaillardetz (2008) calls “dialogical mission,” our way of being church, both its particular and universal expressions, “is enriched by a courageous and respectful engagement with the diversity of created reality out of the conviction that God’s Spirit will create something new and wonderful out of this engagement for the benefit of both church and creation” (p. 36). In fact, diversity is the condition from which the Gospel first spread and continued to spread up until the seventeenth century (Gaillardetz, 2008, p. 35).

Gaillardetz (2008) grounds his discussion in a rich understanding of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In this way, ministry leaders, by looking at the culture and experiences of young people, can take an analogous approach in their ministry with young adults to uncover the deep culture that encapsulates their living, knowing and doing; that is, the longing to be known, in search of healing, in need of belonging and true community amidst an increasingly

individualized and polarized society. Ministry leaders are called to explore the deep culture of young adults, the meaning and value revealed through their experiences and the way they tell their stories.

The Gospel, then, becomes less about something to give or pass on, but more about something to experience, to translate, embody, share, muse, enliven, and transform oneself and society towards the common good. “What is demanded,” according to Gaillardetz (2008), “is a style of dialogue that recognizes we cannot anticipate in advance the outcomes of the conversation,” (p. 72) rather than our encounters, fostered by radical listening and authentic or “reciprocal dialogue” (p. 70) have the capacity to point us to a new, even deeper experience of God in our midst. We are not bringing God to anyone, God is present in the world, in all people and all of creation (c.f, Peter Phan (2003), as cited in Gaillardetz, 2008, p. 62). If our mission is to evangelize young adults, then we must first, according to Phan (as cited in Gaillardetz, 2008), “search for and recog[nize]...the presence and activities of the Holy Spirit among the peoples to be evangelized, and in this humble and attentive process of listening, the evangelizers become the evangelized, and the evangelized becomes the evangelizers (Phan, 2003, 43).

To conceive of missionary discipleship as actively going out with the purpose of encountering the transformative power of God’s “boundless compassion” (Boyle 2010) in young adults and others in our community demands the power of imagination, an ecclesiological imagination born of “careful, respectful, and reciprocal dialogue” (Gaillardetz, 2008, p. 71) and capable of growing a new creation of shared meanings about God’s transformative power in our lives and in the lives of those who came before us. The mission of the church is not directed towards converting people to Catholicism, but aims at building up God’s kin-dom, on earth as it is in heaven.

### **Nurturing the Capacity for an Ecclesiological Imagination**

This posture of reciprocal dialogue, so necessary for interreligious and intercultural dialogue, can become an inner disposition for missionary discipleship in ministry with young adults. Openness to this Spirit, the sheer possibility of a new creation, taps into the affective dimensions of our lives; our imagination – an ecclesiological imagination– capable of holding in creative tension the diversity in unity found throughout the church, of living into the present, formed by the past, and growing towards that which we cannot yet see or experience.

Imagination, according to Maxine Greene “...permits us to give credence to alternative realities [and] allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions” (1995, p. 3). Tom Groome (2002) argues that imagination enables Christians to hold opposing ideas in creative tension, that “Christians need an imagination for paradox if they are to be *catholic*” (259). For example, we are called to “welcome diversity and yet maintain unity in faith; to affirm the local church and likewise the universal Church” (Groome, 2002, p. 259). A “Catholic imagination” according to Andrew Greeley (2000), is “one that views the world and all that is in it as enchanted, haunted by the Holy Spirit and the presence of grace” (p. 184).

Similarly, John Paul Lederach (2005), expert in international peacebuilding and reconciliation, draws inspiration for his work from what he calls a “moral imagination.” Imagination, for Lederach, “seeks and creates a space beyond the pieces that exist” (2005, p. 28.) Like our capacity for encountering God in multiple forms and contexts, imagination is “not confined by what is, or what is known, imagination is the art of creating what does not exist” (Lederach, 2005, p. 28)

Each young adult we come in contact with has a different sense of identity, personality, history, spirituality, and experiences. We are all unique, bringing with us a full range of

experiences born from the intersectionality of our lives- from our gender, ability, race, age, culture, socioeconomic status and ethnicity- and from the way in which our identities shape our sense of self and our place in the world. God is active in our lives in new and insightful ways if only we have ears to hear and eyes to see.

Research (Block, 2008; O’Keefe, 2019; Packard et al., 2020) suggests the condition of belonging is dependent upon the quality of one’s relationships. Trust is the foundation of relationships, and we only grow to trust one another through our ability to practice authentic dialogue, deep listening, and genuine care for the one another. This is what it truly means to “meet people where they are.” However, the tendency of ministry leaders is to change the content or format of their programs rather than to change their style of ministry or ecclesiological worldview. Common ways of gathering predominantly Euro American Catholic young adults in ministry, such as theology on tap or evenings of prayer and worship, do not necessarily show young adults that they matter, they need to form trusting relationships with adults who then invite them into this shared life as Christians to work for the common good. Packard et al. (2020) write, “in our interviews, the young people made it clear that when they encounter a group in which they find belongingness, it’s because of the people and the relationships they experience. In other words, belongingness is generated by relationships not programs” (p. 42).

Similarly, theologian Willie James Jennings (2020), in his book *After Whiteness*, offers a robust discussion on the purposes and pedagogies of contemporary theological education and demonstrates the importance of rethinking the way we teach theology. The gospel must take shape in the lives of those it encounters, or be “translatable” (Jennings, 2020, p. 9), in any context. Jennings (2020) writes:

A gospel that is translatable not only shows the beauty of a God who loves and speaks to us in our particularities, it also promises a form of cultural agency for peoples through which they can hear their own voices, know their own thoughts, and see God for themselves, or even see their own gods more clearly (p. 9).

The pastoral conversion needed to embrace Lakeland's (2015) "kenotic ecclesiology," and one that makes the gospel "translatable," as Jennings (2020) describes, requires a new way of thinking about how we are called to be church. It requires an ecclesiological imagination that enables Catholics to act differently, to transform our parishes into communities of belonging that actively search for encounters with God in others in new and creative ways.

An ecclesiological imagination recognizes that God's creation is not just abundant and inherently diverse, but ongoing, unfolding before our eyes. God is full of surprises. The universe is expanding, new life forms emerge, new encounters with others are pregnant with possibility as each new encounter becomes a site for new discovery, new ways to uncover and experience God's presence and limitless love, compassion, and mercy. In developing an ecclesiological imagination, we nurture the capacity for wonder, to "find God in all things," to be arrested by transcendent encounters with others and the natural world. If we can envision ministry with young adults through an ecclesiological imagination, we actively go forth and, through the invitation to dialogue, search for the ways in which God's abundance shines in the lives of others and in the world, so we may begin the journey towards more trusting relationships that form communities of belonging committed to furthering the kin-dom of God

### **Conclusion**

The words *New Evangelization*, *missionary discipleship*, and even *accompaniment* have become commonplace among ministry leaders hoping to engage young adults, almost

“buzzwords,” if you will. In growing missionary disciples, ministry leaders often design new programs aimed at passing on the faith in new and dynamic ways; however, research shows programs do not equate with a sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging. An ecclesiological imagination is not a new program, it is a new way of imagining our way of being church in the world, as people of God both gathered and sent in mission. Such an imagination propels us forward in search of God in the lives of young adults and in all God’s creation, to learn more about the incomprehensible power of God’s love, mercy and compassion, to find joy and work for justice in a world in need of redemption and deep healing.

As Greg Boyle, S. J. (2010), upon reflecting on his many encounters with God’s profound love and compassion through his ongoing relationships with former and current gang members, writes “God’s unwieldy love, which cannot be contained by our words, wants to accept all that we are and sees our humanity as the privileged place to encounter this magnanimous love... When the vastness of God meets the restriction of our own humanity, words can’t hold it. The best we can do is find the moments that rhyme with this expansive heart of God” (2010, p. 35). An ecclesiological imagination, a way of being church with and for others, has the capacity to turn our hearts from a new evangelization that is not just a new attempt, but a renewed commitment to encounter God’s abundance that is the world.



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