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Catholic leaders are seen in a breakout session May 16 during the National Young Adult Ministry Summit at the St. John Paul II National Shrine in Washington.
(CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Dan Morris-Young

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YOUNG ADULT AMERICAN CATHOLICS

Explaining Vocation in Their Own Words



edited by **Maureen K. Day**

YOUNG ADULT AMERICAN CATHOLICS: EXPLAINING VOCATION IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Maureen K. Day, editor

256 pages; Paulist Press

\$29.95

Young Adult American Catholics: Explaining Vocation in Their Own Words opens a unique window to what is one of the U.S. church's most critical challenges — facing the exit or indifference of a large segment of its younger members.

According to the [Pew Research Center](#) and other researchers, religiously unaffiliated Americans increased from just over 16 percent of the U.S. adult population in 2007 to nearly one in four today. The same research indicates the movement toward becoming a "none" is exponentially higher among the young, including Catholics.

Young Adult American Catholics invites readers to deep, authentic listening as more than four dozen young adult essayists share their personal spiritual journeys and relationships to the church, often wrapping in barber-pole fashion intellectual and lived experiences.

In the preface and introduction respectively, Jerome Baggett and editor [Maureen Day](#) gently coach readers to bracket their own opinions and just listen as objectively as possible to what the young people share.

This is significant. While young adult Catholics are a "subset" of the American Catholic population, the book makes it amply obvious the cohort is greatly varied.

The young authors — while almost all within the U.S. Catholic bishops' young adult definition of 19-39 years old — represent Catholic Workers, Opus Dei members, the LGBTQ community, singles, marrieds, co-habitators, parents, varied ethnic backgrounds, Pope John Paul II devotees, fans of Pope Francis, urban lifestyles, wilderness lovers, foreign-born, converts and cradle Catholics. And then some.

It was helpful for this reviewer to shelve reactions and just listen. The young essayists uniformly presented cogent outlines of sincere, closely held convictions and how they arrived at them. The reader need not argue or applaud.

Day hopes the book might "allow a way for readers to get to know a subset of young adults they might not otherwise encounter" in a "spirit of encounter ... so that they may look, listen, draw nearer to young adults, and offer them compassionate pastoral care as modeled by the ministry of Christ."



A young adult venerates the World Youth Day Cross following Mass Aug. 20 at Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago. (CNS/Chicago Catholic/Karen Callaway)

Keep in mind, points out 26-year-old contributor Rebecca M. Freeman, that "Christ himself was probably around 30 years old when he broke into his public ministry," and that "Mary was raising the son of God in her twenties after giving birth to him as a teenager."

The book's timing is purposeful as the global church was beginning October's [Synod of Bishops](#) in Rome with its theme of "young people, faith and vocational discernment." *Young Adult American Catholics* is organized into 13 topical sections that include issues such as Latinx diversity and views, loose-tether Catholicism, parish life, lay organizations, lay ecclesial ministries, young women religious, recently ordained men and more.

The 13 sections are, in turn, divided into three parts or points of consideration with which to consider vocation. The initial grouping of essays, titled "Vocation Through the Life Course," follows the authors from college days through the immediately following years of discerning life directions such as marriage, employment, parenthood, lifestyle.

The second set of reflections allows the reader to observe how aspects of identity — ethnicity, sexual orientation, political bent, etc. — form the writers' life focus.

The final collection features observations from young Catholics who have tied their lives to official church ministries — ordained men, women religious, lay ecclesial ministers.

Each of the 13 sections is introduced by a top-notch scholar in that particular field, many of whom will be quickly recognizable to reading Catholics. Examples:

- Hosffman Ospino, Boston College's well-known professor of Hispanic ministry;
- [Mary Gautier](#), a pillar at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University;
- Mary Ellen Konieczny, the late Henkels Family Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame;
- Eighty-year-old Jesuit Fr. John Coleman, a widely read sociologist with deep roots at Graduate Theological Union and Los Angeles' Loyola Marymount University.

Several of these scholars' commentaries could easily be standalone commentaries in a wide array of Catholic or other publications.

For example, Kathleen Garces-Foley's primer on what is being called "emerging adulthood" — roughly post-college years until late 20s or the new marriage-ish years — is tightly packed and informative. Keep an eye out for the Marymount University (Arlington, Virginia) religious studies professor's upcoming book on the spiritual lives of American 20-somethings.

The standalone quality is just as true for many of the young Catholic authors. Clear, poignant, candid prose is the standard.

Twenty-two-year-old Madeline Lewis' overview of her just-ending undergraduate years at Notre Dame, for example, pulls the reader right into her initial angst and future delight. A prediction: You will hear more from this talent in the future, and not just because she can employ the usage "snot-all-over-your-face kind of cry" compellingly.

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The young contributors are largely California-connected by residence, education or employment. That said, it is eye-opening to read of their mobility as they bounce around the country and the world for education, ministry, insight and adventure.

As noted, the book is faithful to Francis' insistence that all voices are welcome, from deeply devotional Catholics to agnostics. *Young Adult American Catholics'* stable of authors are all well-educated and articulate. Perhaps somewhat absent are voices of young adult Catholic baristas, beauticians, electricians, construction workers, cab drivers, dental assistants and car salespeople.

There are some general takeaways from the young persons' observations regardless of where they might fall in the left-to-right continuum (too often used to characterize us Catholics) or their current life place:

- Intentionality. Repeatedly, the call was made for parishes, individually or cooperatively, to "do something" that clearly invites and/or involves young adults. This was movingly true for young couples with or without children.

- Informality and community can be touchstones. Activities along the lines of "Pepsi and Pizza" evenings or Theology on Tap for those over 21 were mentioned.
- The formational power and influence of close-knit, religiously observant Catholic families cannot be overstated.
- In the same vein, the majority of writers mentioned key mentors in their development from parish priests, youth ministry leaders, teachers, youth organization guides and spiritual counselors.
- Prayer and building an authentic relationship with God and Jesus animates these young people; it can take on many forms, such as eucharistic adoration, frequent Mass attendance, Scripture study or faith sharing.
- Transformative experiences, such as retreats or immersion ministry in an emerging nation or a struggling urban setting, can play a major role in spiritual growth.
- Whether it is called social justice ministry or pastoral outreach, young adults seek to put the mandate of Gospel care into practice, accompanying those in need, those on the margins. The "Francis effect" of the current pope's exhortations to be one with the poor was mentioned several times.

The book could be a valuable tool on many fronts, in addition to simply providing its reader with a panoramic sense of young adult Catholics. Parish leaders could be better-informed in the evaluation of young adult outreach. Diocesan planners could gain insight into specific challenges, such as ministry to the LGBTQ community or to young Hispanics. Lay organizations might have light bulbs come on about involving young adults in their perhaps flagging apostolates.

[Dan Morris-Young is NCR's West Coast correspondent.]

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