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**Called to Greatness:  
The Rising Generation of Catholics  
and the New Evangelization**

OVER A MILLION OF THEM CAME TO GERMANY. Despite the speculation that Pope Benedict XVI might not have the charisma and personality to attract youth to World Youth Day, they showed up, they chanted “We love you, Benedict,” and they prayed.

In conferences in Denver, Chicago and New Jersey, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students gathered thousands of students from dozens of college campuses across the country to pray together before the Eucharist, attend Mass, hear talks on the fidelity to the Catholic Church and the joy of following Jesus Christ, and to go to confession. Even with over 25 priests, confessions lasted into the early hours of the morning. One young man, after having engaged a speaker at the conference in an argument over whether there is such thing as right and wrong, apologized the following day after having gone to confession: “I realize my arguments yesterday were my attempt to justify the way I was living. I know there is a right and wrong, and after confession it feels great to be back on the right side.”

In a Division I university in the Midwest, the Catholic chaplain and a young lay Catholic college missionary have started a Catholic fraternity. In its second year it has almost 40 students. In fact, all over the country young Catholics are starting to live together in these “households.” Why? “Because in the modern world to be the kind of person I am called by God to be requires the aid and fellowship of my brothers” is how one young man put it.

In the last five years, a small Midwestern orthodox Catholic college, founded over a century ago, has gone from 8 to over 100 theology majors. The success, according to one professor, stems from the return to orthodoxy in the classroom. Daily Mass attendance at the same school has risen from 12 to 250 students. A few seminaries, both college and major, are again experiencing growth, as are a number of religious orders. What do these orders have in common? Most of them continue to wear “traditional” habits.

Lay youth movements devoted to evangelization are growing across the country. Young people are giving years of service to teaching and preaching the faith. The enrollment at many of the new Catholic colleges where the faculty members take the oath of fidelity to the Catholic Church is also increasing.

In the diocese of one of the most outspoken “conservative” bishops in the country, the Sunday night Cathedral Mass, celebrated by the bishop, is regularly standing room only—the attendees . . . young adults.

### **The Romance of Orthodoxy**

Colleen Carroll, in her recent study, *The New Faithful*, has identified what she calls “the romance of Christian orthodoxy.” She notes that “across the nation . . . a small but committed core of young Christians is intentionally embracing organized religion and traditional morality.” “Their numbers,” she adds, “and their disproportionately powerful influence on their peers, parents, and popular culture—are growing.”<sup>1</sup>

I have encountered many such young men and women over the years, having spent the entirety of my adult life in serving young Christians, first as a campus outreach leader, later as a college professor, and more recently in the leadership of a national Catholic college youth movement and as president of a new graduate school for the New Evangelization. The most energetic and zealous element in Catholic youth is in fact orthodox, devout and committed to the Church.

Of course behind this phenomenon looms the figure of the late Holy Father, John Paul II. No man has ever so captivated youth. There is a great story that the people in Denver like to tell. When the helicopter carrying the Pope to World Youth Day in 1993 was descending into the stadium, the cry from the crowd was so loud and enthusiastic that the pilot nearly lost control of the aircraft. The night before he died, 80,000 people (mostly youth) filled St. Peter’s square keeping vigil for their Holy Father. Stalin once asked, “How many legions does the Pope have?” Apparently quite a few. No man in history has ever gained such a crowd—and so many of them youth.

For Carroll the return to traditional religion and morality has the potential to radically impact modern life. “[This] grassroots movement,” she writes, “. . . bears watching because it has thrived in the most unlikely places, captured the hearts of the most unlikely people, and aims to effect the most unlikely of outcomes: a revitalization of American Christianity and culture.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this is too sanguine. After all, there are many statistics that a significant number of young Catholics are not interested in traditional religion or morality at all. Among Catholic youth one finds widespread confusion on such basic Church teachings as the Eucharist and the natures of Christ, statistics that indicate relatively no difference between the moral life of young Catholics and their non-Catholic peers, and widespread support for legislation that directly contradicts official Church teaching. So why spend so much time discussing a minority that enjoys World Youth Days, high Masses, and papal encyclicals?

Because history is not made by majorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Colleen Carroll, *The New Orthodoxy*, 9,4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. In my own experience this rising generation is already having an impact.

As social anthropologist Margaret Mead is believed to have said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” For the Christian this applies to more than political movements. In the words of the English Catholic historian Christopher Dawson:

“The great cultural changes and the historic revolutions that decide the fate of nations or the character of an age are the cumulative result of a number of spiritual decisions—the faith and insight, or the refusal and blindness, of individuals. No one can put his finger on the ultimate spiritual act which tilts the balance and makes the external order of society assume a new form. In this sense we may adopt Burke’s saying and assert that the prayer of some unknown Christian or some unrecognized and unadmitted act of spiritual surrender may change the face of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

If Mead and Dawson are correct, any consideration of the rising generation of Catholics that seeks to go beyond the descriptive and instead identify the cultural shaping power of this generation, cannot be content with statistics that reveal majority opinions; rather, it is necessary to identify and understand that subculture of committed, zealous and visionary men and women in the rising generation, the ones who may very well “change the face of the world.”

For many, this generation of faithful Catholics is a sign of great hope and promise for the renewal of Catholic life and culture in the world. But can we really expect a small movement of youth within the Catholic Church to renew Church life, let alone culture? After all, this generation is still very young, and, while it is characterized by great zeal and dedication, it is a long way from making good on its promise.

There are no inevitabilities in history. Many such movements, if we may use the term loosely, have come to naught.<sup>4</sup> Therefore it is necessary for those of us who desire the success of this trend to do more than celebrate it; we must take stock of this dedicated subculture of Catholic youth and identify certain challenges it faces—challenges which must be overcome if the hopes attached to it are to be fulfilled.

Many challenges to these young Catholics come from outside cultural and political influences. But since these are relatively obvious and since many youth are quite aware of them they require little comment. The following essay considers instead four challenges arising from *inside* the rising generation of Catholics. These challenges are: 1) to move beyond rebellion against a previous generation to an effort of rebuilding Catholic life; 2) to really study and re-appropriate the Catholic tradition; 3) to avoid

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture* (1960), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Hope in the young is always a tenuous thing. In his last essays, George Bernanos expressed just such a hope. Given the turn of events from the time of his writing these essays in the late 40’s to the revolution of the 60’s, it is rather sobering to read his words: “There are many young people among you; I discovered them in the audience at my first glance. It is to them that I address myself, and, over their heads, to those even younger than they are, for I think today more than ever that childhood is the last resource of the world, its last chance.” *Last Essays*, 79.

limiting Catholic life to simply obeying Catholic law, and 4) to avoid the temptation to put activity in ministry above contemplation. If each of these challenges is met, I believe we could see a genuine cultural renewal in the Church and in the world; however, if the challenges are ignored, this rising generation of faithful Catholics may, in fact, make the situation worse.

### **From Rebellion to Rebuilding**

If a previous generation can be said to have rebelled against the Catholic Church as they found it, this generation can be said to be in the process of rebelling against the rebellion. This is certainly the way many young Catholics see it. Discussing the follies of a previous generation is, for many young Catholics, a favorite activity. Everyone has a story about some liturgical experiment or muddled teaching or rather nefarious activities from the 70's and 80's. I recently raised some concern about this tendency to blame the previous generation for all the flaws in Catholic life to a good friend of mine over a cup of coffee. In his late fifties, a revert to the Catholic Church, he replied simply: "That's exactly right. You know what young Catholics need more than anything right now? You need my self-centered generation to die and get out of the way."

But the challenge facing this next generation of Catholics is too great to be met by simple rebellion. After all, rebellion is primarily a destructive affair. It requires something to be torn down. But what, we may ask, is there left to tear down? The hopes of the previous generation that they would build something new on the rubble of the pre-Vatican II Church have not been fulfilled. The altars were stripped, and they were not redecorated. There is very little still left standing, and there is very little that is vibrant enough to warrant attack. So, while there is still a fair bit for young Catholics to reject in the previous generation's conception of the Catholic Church, the great task of the rising generation is not one of rebellion, but of rebuilding. And such a task cannot be fueled by resentment, however real or false, against the previous generation.

But this resentment can often exist in more subtle, and I believe more dangerous, forms than complaint-fests about perceived abuses. It is true that the rising generation of Catholics love the Pope, papal documents, and the *Catechism*; but it is also true that they are far too free and easy with their criticism, which in some cases borders on disdain, of the Catholic bishops. I believe many of them are not aware that such free and easy criticism of a descendant of the Apostles would have scandalized the early Church. Ignatius of Antioch and Pope Clement I were both rather adamant about the respect owed to the bishops.

This is not an argument for an obedience that assumes bishops never make mistakes. Rather, it is meant to expose and hopefully begin to correct the subtle anti-clerical bias in many youth that is sometimes hidden behind deep devotion to the Holy See. Perhaps it stems from a wider cultural desire among youth for celebrities but not authorities. Whatever its source, it has always been the case that the Catholic tradition has held the position of bishop in deep reverence. There is no higher authority in the Church. And while there have always been bishops who have not lived up to their high call, the

tradition, at its best, has always understood what it means to be in the line of the Apostles. Given that our age is characterized by a deep-seated suspicion of authority and an almost instinctive tendency towards self-sufficiency and radical autonomy, we must look with suspicion and concern on any free and easy disdain for descendants of the Apostles.

We must also be wary of such disdain of one's parents and other authorities. It is no easy thing for a young person who has recently deepened their devotion to the Catholic Faith to understand and relate to parents and other relatives who may think such a decision as silly or, perhaps, even dangerous. I have known many young men and women for whom the decision to do Catholic mission work has been a source of pain and misunderstanding with their parents. For others, the personal decision to support pro-life causes can be perceived, perhaps, as a judgment of the actions of one's parents. Commitment to Catholic teaching on the indissolubility of marriage has put many young Catholics and their parents in very difficult and trying circumstances.

The situation is also difficult in the pews. Many young Catholics are tempted to react against priests who preach things contrary to the Catechism or who celebrate Mass in a way that goes against the liturgical norms of the Church. Many are disappointed by what they perceive as a lack of clear moral thinking in the confessional as well.

How exactly a young Catholic is to handle these situations, whether in the family or the parish, requires a level of prudence that many of them have not yet attained. What does a youth say to a Catholic parent who has divorced and remarried outside of the Church and yet continues to take communion? How should a young Catholic act when a college chaplain demands that no sign of reverence be made to the Eucharist upon entering the Church? The complexity of such situations, of which there are hundreds of examples, can lead some young Catholics to simply dismiss their elders in the faith. It can also lead to cynicism, that slow acting acid that gradually corrodes the desire to do great things. It is not uncommon to hear young people mock their priests, parents, Catholic teachers, and parishes with abandon.

I wish to make an important distinction at this point. While many claim that in general youth culture in the West is deeply cynical, the cynicism of many young Catholics is, to my mind, shallow. Many of them wear their cynicism like an ill-cut suit. The rising generation of Catholics, in my experience, is actually quick to follow leadership that they trust, and, if called on to make personal sacrifices for the Gospel, they will. I have found consistently, that when presented with a call to heroism for Christ, many young Catholics joyfully and quickly respond.

In conclusion, it is simply essential that this rising generation resist the all too easy invitation to dishonor the activities of a previous generation of Church leaders. The Church, for her own order and in obedience to Christ, has always been characterized by a healthy respect for authority. Therefore this rising generation must, as Our Lord commands, find ways to show honor to their elders even if they disagree with them. This will yield virtue. To honor an authority that one disagrees with requires a death to

personal preference and tremendous patience. Many young men and women do not want parents who are not in communion with the Church; they do not want to attend a parish where the preaching often muddles doctrine, but the Lord has put them there. It is a temptation of this generation to think that most problems have quick solutions. How easy to play that mental game: “If I were bishop I would just . . .” But Our Lord, for the sake of love, submitted to death. And in God’s providence, most difficult situations with authority are not easily resolved. Such situations require a steadfast trust in God’s plan, a readiness to yield personal desires to the point of death, and long-suffering. The rising generation must remember that they are not saving the Church, whatever its faults, but that the Church is saving them.

If this generation is characterized by long-suffering and obedience, they may very well transform the culture. On the other hand, a generation given to disrespect for authority and cynicism will only aid the decline.

### **Reconnecting to Tradition**

Resentment cannot build. Complaining is simply a drain of energy that is better spent elsewhere. More than this, concentrating on the follies of last half century will yield a vision of Catholic life that is truncated and rather thin. The task before this generation is one of building, and for this a deep connection with the whole tradition of the Catholic Church is necessary. This is not a matter of going back 50 or 100 years; it requires reconnecting with the tradition that spans two millennia.

In part, this is a search for identity. Rebelling against a previous generation does more than feed bitterness; it also cuts one off from important data about who we are. Like an amnesiac, the Catholic who does not know his past does not know who he is. Identity comes from the past, whatever the admixture of joy and pain. Without a clear understanding of the past—both recent and distant—the rising generation will not know the way forward.

To reconnect with the tradition is not what was once referred to as Catholic Medievalism, by which was meant a nostalgic desire to return to the perceived golden age of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Church. There is no return. Still, the effort to bring the Catholic Faith to bear on the modern world and to allow the great mystery of the Incarnation to penetrate our social life requires a careful study of previous cultural forms and expressions. We must go to the roots of Catholic culture, to the Mass, to the monks, to the sacraments, to the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, to the saints, if we are to play our part in the formation of a Christian culture.

There is no blueprint for the formation of Christian culture. Here the human genius, guided by the tradition, has a wide berth.<sup>5</sup> In Denver, for example, we have formed a few

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 23: “Whenever in reflective and receptive contemplation we touch, even remotely, the core of all things, the hidden ultimate reason of the living universe, the divine foundation of all that is, the purest form of all archetypes (and the act of perception, immersed in

households of men and women who live together under a limited rule and share a common life. Our main celebrations as a community and as families occur on feast days, with prayer, song, good food, and, occasionally, as on Las Posadas<sup>6</sup>, with costumes for the children. We try to make meals, especially on Saturday nights, opportunities for prayer and conversation, replete with candles and other symbols. Many of us pray the Divine Office together and try to catch Mass together. One of the great challenges of modern life is the isolation of young people from every other age group, so many of our activities integrate young single Catholics with Catholic families.

Our tradition has a great deal more to offer than this short list, and, if we wish to build something that endures, we must mine that tradition. Otherwise we will simply be patching the inside walls of a crumbling house.

At the heart of the reconnection with tradition is Catholic education. We cannot be content to call our young Catholics educated if all of them have not at least encountered, and some of them been immersed in, the Catholic tradition. There are many in this generation who are not even aware of how little they know. There is a typical young zealous Catholic; he usually has recently deepened his commitment to the Faith and spent a year reading the Bible, visiting some Catholic web sites and learning some apologetics. At the end of this year, or we may even grant him two, he shares an exciting idea for a “new” Catholic movement that will renew the Church and transform the world in his lifetime. One applauds the zeal, but . . .

It is somewhat ironic that a generation that takes pleasure in pointing out the mistakes and folly of its immediate predecessors fails to recognize that most of what they know came from those same predecessors. If a previous generation failed to hand on the tradition, then the rising generation has not received it. This is not to say that many in the rising generation do not know anything. Rather, to borrow categories from Frank Sheed, it means that while many have learned many Catholic facts, they may not have Catholic intellects. Sheed is worth citing here:

“Now . . . most of us have Catholic wills, but not many of us have Catholic intellects. When we look at the universe, we see pretty well what other people see, plus certain extra features taught us by our religion. For the most part, the same influences that form other people’s minds, form ours—the same habits of thought, inclinations, bodily senses, indolences, worked upon by the same newspapers, periodicals, best-sellers, films, radio programs. So that we have not so much Catholic minds as worldly minds with Catholic patches. Intellectually we wear our Catholicism like a badge on the lapel of the same kind of suit that everyone else is wearing.”<sup>7</sup>

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contemplation, is the most intensive form of grasping and knowing), whenever and wherever we thus behold the very essence of reality—there is an activity that is meaningful in itself taking place.”

<sup>6</sup> A Mexican morality play.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Sheed, *Theology and Sanity*, 2.

The Catholic intellect sees things differently. For the Catholic intellect everything that exists, from the stars to street lamps, is at every moment being held in existence by the will of God. For the Catholic intellect the visible world is only a part of reality, and perhaps the least influential part of reality in the determination of human affairs. For the Catholic intellect, to paraphrase Newman, it is better that the stars should fall from the sky than that one immortal soul should commit a mortal sin. And for the Catholic intellect, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the highest and most noble event on Earth; it is the aligning of the things on Earth with the heavenly order and a participation in the perpetual praise of God in heaven that is going on unceasingly. This is more than a set of convictions; it is a way of seeing all of reality.

## **Law and Greatness**

It has been a fortunate consequence of the reaction against the lawlessness of one age that a generation has arisen that seems to take law very seriously. The rising generation has become quite proficient at learning laws, from moral law to liturgical law and, for an odd few, even canon law. The frequency with which one hears expressions like “the Church teaches” or “rubrics” or “the Church documents” speaks volumes about the rising generation’s connection with the law of the Church. And while many of the laws that get discussed have to do with issues of sex, they are by no means limited to such concerns.

In some areas, like courtship, the rising generation is actually looking for laws that are not there. I have participated in a number of Catholic seminars on male and female identity, and as anyone who has spent much time in young adult ministry knows, the question and answer periods are dominated by requests for concrete practical “rules” for relating to the other sex. “Is it appropriate for a man to hold the door?” “How late should I have stayed out with him?” and (this was a real question) “What does it mean if he sent me two email; does that mean the same thing as one phone conversation?”

I do my best to answer such questions by referring those asking them back to sound principles, but such questions speak to a strong desire among young people for concrete rules. In a time when there are no rules of etiquette for courtship, or even for a dinner party, many young people are feeling the full weight of the social anxieties that such rules were meant to alleviate in other cultures. I believe the desire for rules of etiquette and the more important desire for clear moral laws that lies behind it are good.

For those of the generation that saw law as simply restriction and who devoted much of their energy to setting people free from it, the return to law is perhaps one of the most baffling characteristics of the rising generation. One Catholic scholar in commenting on this “return to law” among the youth seems to imply that it stems from a kind of neurotic postmodern identity crisis. Others attribute it to the foibles of youth, such as the need to draw hard lines and make life “simple.” In reality, though, the return to law is, not simply a youth thing, but a very human and sane thing. Law is a good. It is a great good. It protects those things which we most love, as just about every civilization in human history has known.

Still, while Church law is a gem to be protected, it does not contain within itself the fullness of the Christian life. And here I think youth need to be careful. I believe there is tendency among many of the rising generation of Catholics to reduce the Christian faith to obedience to the moral law and the rubrics governing the celebration of the Mass.

This reductionist tendency tends to manifest itself in quick judgments about the Catholicity of others. One can find young Catholics quick to criticize one another for the way in which they receive communion, for example. Of course this kind of judgment is not limited to young people by any means. Still, for many youth, as one priest once put it, there is tendency to treat accidentals as essentials in the Christian life, which often leads to serious disagreements over things that the Church has permitted.

The root of this tendency, in my experience, is a lack of ability to distinguish between the good, the better and the best. Thus where someone may see various goods or degrees of good, a reductionist will build a life, a ministry, an event around only one good, understood in a limited way, and condemn or look down upon all others. I have been witness to very serious disputes over whether it is Christian to own a television, whether one is really a Christian if he does not homeschool, whether it is possible to really pray depending on how you receive the Eucharist, or whether this or that method of evangelization is really what Christ would want. The net result of such tendencies is *always* harmful division.

Another danger that comes from reducing the Christian life to positive Church law is that it can lead to an unhealthy limitation of the applicability of moral reason. Many youth have embraced the moral law about certain issues, such as sex, but then proceed to identify many other important issues as simply beyond the realm of the moral. In other words, the young reductionist will hold that a great many things in modern life are simply morally irrelevant. This is particularly the case for many of this rising generation, for example, in the area of electronic entertainment.

Young Catholics, in my experience, are quick to judge the morality of a movie or television show or video game based on whether it has sexual content, but they fail to ask the deeper questions about the electronic media in general. What is the anthropology that it assumes? What is the moral universe it is creating? What is the role and effect of electronic propaganda on society in general? Unreflective about the way images can be impressed on our minds—something biologists, psychologists, and the advertisers who hire them understand quite well—young people very rarely question these ubiquitous forms of entertainment that require near total passivity and isolate human beings from one another. Since the electronic media is not against the moral law as they understand it, many young Catholics reason that as long as they stay away from sex scenes and too much violence, their faith is well protected. But the question they should be able to ask and answer is “Are movies good for human flourishing?”

Nothing is beyond the light of the Gospel. The cultural transformation of the modern world requires that the Faith, with its moral teaching, shine its light on every aspect of human life, and the rising generation of Catholics needs to understand this.

Finally, too narrow a focus on law can be a distraction from the other elements of the Christian life, most importantly the need for personal transformation. In these cases the knowledge of Church documents, teachings, or liturgical practices becomes a surrogate for personal holiness. Thus knowledge of the law becomes the way one assesses one's "Catholicity," by which it is often implied sanctity. We cannot allow knowledge of Church teaching, which is essential to Catholic life, to distract us from the pursuit of true sanctity. In the end, only true sanctity will give this rising generation the spiritual influence it needs to renew Christian life and culture in the modern world.

### **Activity and Contemplation**

The fourth and last challenge to be treated in this essay is the temptation to a hyper-activity that frequently derails many young Catholics on their track to Christian maturity. All too often the activities of many young zealous Catholics run ahead of their prayer, virtue, and knowledge. This comes at a real cost. Recently Benedict XVI, reflecting on his own responsibilities as Pope, said: "It is necessary to pay attention to the dangers of excessive activity, regardless of one's condition and occupation . . . , because . . . numerous occupations often lead to 'hardness of heart,' 'they are no more than suffering for the spirit, loss of intelligence and dispersion of grace.'"<sup>8</sup>

Ours is an age enamored of plans and procedures and quick solutions. Give someone a little bit of money, an Excel spreadsheet and a website and he can start a company. This model of institutional development is frequently applied to ministry as well.

How many movements go for breadth – usually in the name of having a larger impact – before they have put down roots strong enough to handle such growth? We are obsessed with numbers and measurements. Everything is assessed by its size. A simple glance at the newspaper is revealing in this case. Note that every event, whether it is a plane crash, a sporting event, or a protest is always assessed by how many people attended it. In advertisements we frequently hear how many people use a product or how many recommend it. If we are told about the war, we are told how many people have died. This climate makes it easy for us to forget that the kingdom of God is not driven by numbers.

Thus we can see ministries obsessed with expansion. Rather than thinking of their task as one of constantly deepening commitment to Christ, they treat ministry like a McDonald's franchise. It is an instinctive reaction of some donors to these movements to immediately ask how quickly the ministry can expand and how it can be modeled in other dioceses. On another level, this tendency can lead many young Christians to emphasize big meetings or events that draw a great number of people. But for those of us who have been in ministry a long time, we know that the most effective evangelization is always one on one. This is not to disparage big events; they have an important function in evangelization. But they are not sufficient, nor are they always necessary. Finally, it is not uncommon to run across the young Catholic who is now in their senior of college

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<sup>8</sup> CASTEL GANDOLFO, Italy, AUG. 20, 2006 ([Zenit.org](http://Zenit.org)).

who is involved in so many different Christian activities that, for lack of sleep and energy, they are doing none of them very well. There is in fact a high level of burnout among young Catholics with a mind toward mission.

Any missionary effort that becomes overly concerned with numbers, whether through a desire to franchise a technique of evangelization or to put the majority of their energy on big events or simply to take on more than one should, is weakened in its impact. This is why the Holy Father is frequently reminding the Christian people about the mystery of the mustard seed, that the Church has the largest impact when first she is built small and deep in Christ. The conversion of the Roman Empire was not due to large tent meetings or Catholic television programming that reached millions of people (although no doubt our fathers in the faith would have found some ways of using such things). The conversion of Rome was the result of small communities of men and women faithfully living the Way and preaching the Gospel in word and deed. When the Church was finally big enough to get the attention of the Emperor and all the powers of the greatest empire in the world were set against it to destroy it, it had the depth to hold fast. Surely there was a great pruning, and many branches were cut and burned, but the tree did not wither and die. It continued to bear fruit, because of the depth of its roots. The true conversion of culture requires, above all, that this rising generation build small and deep.

### **Conclusion: Building Small and Deep**

But how to do this?

I believe Pope Benedict XVI addresses this question well in commenting on the following passage from First Peter: “Like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.” In his comments, the Holy Father observes: “Our thirst for action requires that we translate such words without exception into the active voice: Let us build the city of God, the Church, the society and so forth. The New Testament sees our role differently. The construction manager is God or the Holy Spirit. We are the stones—for us building means being built.”<sup>9</sup>

According to the Holy Father, we must first recognize that all Christian ministry is God’s work, not ours. He is the builder. Thus our efforts can never be simply what we think we ought to do. All of our work is directed by God and comes from him. This requires obedience on our part, and often patience. In our effort to “get stuff done,” to “make a difference,” or to “have an impact” we can frequently take over the ministry and forget that we are under the direction of another. This can be a fatal mistake.

But there is something else we observe in Benedict’s reflections. Not only is the ministry God’s, but we ourselves are being ministered to. We can never lose sight of the fundamental fact that we are being built. Pope Benedict continues: “If we want to become a house, we—every one of us—must accept the fate of being cut and carved. In order to be suitable for the house we must let ourselves be bent into shape for the places

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and Liturgy Today*, 164.

where we are needed. . . . [We] can no longer just do whatever comes to mind and seems worthwhile. We can no longer just go wherever we want. We must accept that our belt will be fastened by another and that we will also be led where we do not want to go.”<sup>10</sup> In short, we are not saving the Church, the Church is saving us.

The Lord does not need a multitude of ministries, he needs men and women who are willing to be living stones, obedient sons and daughters, prepared to do whatever he wills. This requires patience and discipline, virtues not normally associated with the young. Anyone who has ever seriously set himself to the pursuit of holiness can testify to its ardor. The cross, for all the grace that comes with it, is still a cross, or as Scupoli put it, the life of virtue is “spiritual combat.”

In his first address to youth as Pope, Benedict XVI, said: “The ways of the Lord are not easy, but we were not created for an easy life, but for great things.” The call for this rising generation is the call to greatness. Not greatness in the world’s eyes, but the greatness of disciples. And this requires above all a deep personal transformation, a generosity in life, a total self-donation, and a patient love. “When [Christ] speaks of the cross that we ourselves have to carry,” Benedict continues, “it has nothing to do with a taste for torture or of pedantic moralism. It is the impulse of love, which has its own momentum and does not seek itself but opens the person to the service of truth, justice and the good. Christ shows God to us, and thus the true greatness of man.”

And holiness of life and evangelization are not unrelated. In fact, they are intimately connected. Only men and women of virtue can ever really transform the world, because only the witness of holiness can fulfill the call of the New Evangelization in a world that ridicules the Gospel. John Henry Cardinal Newman once explained this principle: “Men persuade themselves, with little difficulty, to scoff at principles, to ridicule books, to make sport of the names of good men; but they cannot bear the presence [of holy men]: it is holiness embodied in personal form, which they cannot steadily confront and bear down.”<sup>11</sup>

The people who make history are, in the end, the saints. If the rising generation of Catholics and its leaders find themselves given mainly to activity and not to contemplation, to doing things instead of being transformed into the image of Christ, there will be brief flashes of light in the darkness surely, but no lasting day.

I wish to conclude where I began, with a comment about history. The world is not fundamentally transformed by majorities. It never has been. The rising generation of Catholics, whatever its size, can, God willing, fulfill its promise and transform the world. But they must seek to be saints. This was the genius, for example, of the movement that St. Ignatius of Loyola founded. He knew that in the end the only thing that would make his missions successful was the holiness, the Christ-like abandonment of the individual Jesuit. The power of the Jesuits was not in their organization, their ability to franchise, or their evangelical techniques. They did not convert others by complaining about the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, “Personal Influence, the Means of Propagating the Truth,” para. 27.

failure of the generation that preceded them (despite the fact that there were many things to complain about). Although known for their obedience to the law, they never used it to criticize the good in those around them, nor did they use it as an excuse to avoid true discipleship. Everything for them came under the scrutiny of the Gospel, and everything was offered for God's greater glory. The secret of the early Jesuits was the secret of their prayer, namely, the *Spiritual Exercises*, and their unrelenting pursuit of the character of Christ. Another way to put this is that the real transformation of the world depends on the character of this rising generation. Are they willing to accept the discipline and endure the trials that come with gaining the character of Christ? If the answer to this is "Yes," then I believe the rising generation of Catholics will fulfill St Ignatius' exhortation to all of his men: "Go, and set the world on fire."