PETER STEINFELS: Good evening, everyone. I would like to welcome you to “Lost? Twenty-Somethings and the Church.”

Tonight’s forum on “The Known and the Unknown” will be followed tomorrow by an all-day conference examining the worlds and experiences of twenty-somethings from sexuality to spirituality. I particularly want to welcome all the twenty-somethings and assure you that, although tonight’s forum draws, first of all, on the knowledge of two non-twenty-something scholars and one twenty-something scholar, twenty-something voices will be well represented throughout tomorrow’s program.

These two overlapping events have been organized by the Francis and Ann Curran Center for American Catholic Studies at Fordham and the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture. My name is Peter Steinfels, and I am co-director of the Center on Religion and Culture, as well as moderator for this evening’s forum.

When American Catholics were polled five years ago about the most serious problems
facing the Church, only the headline-grabbing topic of sexual abuse outranked the shortage of priests and sisters and the lack of involvement of young adults. Great interest, and perhaps some great anxiety, about that latter question has been reflected in the response to tonight and tomorrow’s programs. We were overwhelmed by the number of people registering. Two weeks ago, at the time of the Martin Luther King Day weekend, every seat in this particular auditorium was accounted for, and we had to devise a live-feed simulcast to McNally Auditorium in the Law School for later registrants and for those walking in. We welcome all of you who are over there, although I can’t see you.

Needless to say, we are gratified by this response. We recognize the fact that there will be some empty seats here and some empty seats over there due to the weather conditions. But we admit that it may be testing our limits of technical resources, and we apologize in advance for any glitches that may occur. We plan eventually to post videotapes of all sessions on the website, www.fordham.edu/lost, along with other materials, like your questions, suggestions, and points of discussion emerging from these two days. Transcripts also may appear on the website of one of the other of the two centers.

Before proceeding any further — and I address this to our friends in McNally as well — let me ask everyone to please turn off your cell phones, beepers, car alarms, or anything else that could possibly interrupt speakers and distract your fellow listeners. Thank you very much.

Tonight’s forum will feature a thirty-five-minute initial presentation and two brief responses from speakers whom I will introduce in turn. That will be followed by discussion among them and questions from me and, finally, questions from you. Please write your questions on the cards that you can find in your program. Write them at any time in the course of the presentations and discussions. Please don’t wait, but after you have written them out, just hold them up. There are student assistants on the side who will bring them forward. We will do our best to eliminate duplicates and prioritize those questions that seem to be most frequently posed. I beg you, please, please, write legibly.

The poll I mentioned a moment ago was part of a study, American Catholics Today, published in 2007 and coauthored by James Davidson and three other sociologists. A professor emeritus at Purdue, James Davidson is one of the most eminent sociologists of American Catholicism, and one long interested in the question of differences between generations. I needn’t repeat the titles of his books, already listed in your program, although I discovered that he has just published yet another one, called Ranking Faiths:
Religious Stratification in America.

Books by him, by the way, and by several other speakers tonight and tomorrow, are on sale in the lobby here to your right as you go out. Jim has also provided us — I believe that’s in the program — a handout containing some of the data that he will be mentioning. We are extremely proud that he is our first and chief presenter. Please welcome James Davidson.

JAMES DAVIDSON: I want to thank Peter and I want to thank all of you for being here tonight, given the conditions on the outside. Let’s hope we can make it a warm and festive occasion on the inside.

Recent reports indicate that 31 percent of Americans who are eighteen years of age and older were raised Catholic. However, these reports also show that about 18 percent of these people now belong to some other religion. When asked about their current religion, another 14 percent say they are atheists, agnostic, or nothing in particular.

Thus, according to these reports, the Church has retained about two-thirds of its members and lost about a third of them. If you want some round numbers, that’s what I have tried to calculate for you at the top of that handout.

These losses have been described in very dramatic terms. The Pew report on America’s religious landscape singles out the Catholic Church, saying it has lost more people percentagewise and in terms of absolute numbers than any other religious group. In American Grace, Bob Putnam and David Campbell say that the Church is hemorrhaging members and that without the inflow of Latinos to shore up the number of Catholics in the United States, the American Catholic population would have experienced a catastrophic collapse. These reports have alarmed many Catholic Church leaders. Some have concluded that the Church is standing on the edge of a demographic precipice. Others have called the findings depressing, but expressed hope that his trend can be reversed.

The organizers of this conference have asked us to step back a little bit and review the situation. Are the findings right? If so, how did we get into this situation? Can we do anything about it? If so, what? I want to respond to each of those three questions.

First, are the findings right? The Pew Research Center and the Pew Forum for Religion
and Public Life, I think, have produced outstanding work, and their reports have added to our understanding of America’s religious landscape and the Millennial Generation. Also, Bob [Putnam] and David [Campbell’s] book is a landmark. The methods are sound, the data seem accurate, and the message is clear: The Catholic Church has lost members in recent decades, and today’s young adults aren’t as attached to the Church as young adults used to be. As many of you know, my own work on generations has pointed in the same general direction.

Having said that, I want to offer some alternative interpretations of the data.

First, I have no trouble thinking of cradle Catholics who now belong to other faiths as lost or as former Catholics or as ex-Catholics. They have decided to be something else, and it’s highly unlikely that they will ever return to the Church. But I’m uncomfortable with the way researchers and the articles that I have read in newspapers treat cradle Catholics who now describe themselves as agnostics, atheists, or nothing in particular. Labeling them as unaffiliated and viewing them as former Catholics suggests that they have made a clean break with the Church. It’s true that they don’t belong to local parishes or support the Church in any other way. They’re lost insofar as they are not benefiting from the Church and the Church is not benefiting from their talents. But by canon law, they are still Catholic, and when you get to know them a little better than you do in a telephone interview, you learn that many of them are still very Catholic and think of themselves in that way.

Many of my colleagues over the years at Purdue fit that description. They grew up Catholic and, if asked about their current religion, would probably say they are atheists or agnostics or nothing in particular. They don’t have close relationships to the Church. But they are still Catholic, and they know it. They still accept many core Church teachings. They also see me as a fellow traveler. They invite me to go drinking with them, and what better measure of Catholic religiosity could there be than that? I was out with two of them just a couple of weeks ago, and we had a ball talking about the Church for almost two hours. In fact, one of them was in town last night, and we reconvened. It was wonderful.

Over the years, many of these kinds of colleagues have asked me to help them find a priest who would baptize their babies, a priest who would talk with them about family problems or give their parents last rites. They are not nearly as lost as former Catholics who now belong to other religions. Many of these so-called affiliated are really still family. They may be distant cousins, but they are far more accessible than those who have joined
another faith. In some ways, they are more like less involved affiliates than they are like people who switch to another religion.

Thinking of them in this way instead of lumping them with former Catholics suggests that the Church may not be hemorrhaging quite as badly as some reports suggest. The numbers at the top of that handout give you some indication of the differences.

Second, we agree that three out of four Americans never change their religion and that about a fourth do. We also agree that there has been some decline in the retention rate and some increase in the percentage of people who have changed their religion. In the early 1900s, the retention rate for Americans in general was about 80 percent; now it’s about 73. For Catholics, it was about 88 percent; now it’s about 70.

But our interpretations of those data are different. The Pew reports and *American Grace* acknowledge that a majority have never changed, but they stress the fact that switching religions is more common than it used to be. On the other hand, I acknowledge that switching has increased, but I’m more impressed with the fact that the central tendency is not to change. While others make a big fuss over the decline, I’m more impressed with the fact that in a society which stresses the idea that religion is voluntary, and therefore subject to change, seven out of ten people don’t change their faith, even when it would be in their best interest to do so. If the decline were to continue at the same rate and nothing else changed, it would be well over 100 years from now before a majority of Catholics and other Americans would have changed religions.

But, of course, things will change. For example, the percentage of Latino Catholics will increase. As the data show, Latinos are more likely to retain their Catholicism than Anglos. In this sense, too, the crisis may not be as cataclysmic as it sometimes is made out to be.

Third, the recent reports suggest that the trend away from high levels of religious affiliation and religiosity toward lower levels of affiliation and religiosity has been pretty linear. And it has been linear in the last several decades. But if we take a longer look at it, it seems more curvilinear. Admittedly, the data from the late 1800s and the early 1900s are not as definitive as the data from more recent surveys, but, as I read the historical evidence, it suggests that young adult Catholics’ relationship to the Church was rather tenuous back then, too. Although young adults considered themselves Catholic and were involved in a devotional style of Catholicism, frequent communion wasn’t a common
practice at the time, lay participation in Church governance wasn’t encouraged, relatively few young men chose religious life, and young adults who wanted to assimilate into American society and culture discovered that Pope Leo XIII and Pope Pius X didn’t approve their Americanist and modernist inclinations.

Young adults’ relationship with the Church grew stronger in the 1930s, the 1940s, and the 1950s. In addition to receiving the early sacraments, two-thirds attended Mass weekly. The majority went to confession at least once a year. Many more young men chose the priesthood. Young adults achieved extraordinarily high levels of what researchers at the time called associational involvement or doctrinal orthodoxy. The strength of their relationship to the Church was a source of confidence in young adults and a great hope for the future of the Church.

Today’s young adults aren’t nearly that involved in the Church. The following profile is based on numerous sources, but some of the Pew data are presented in the bottom half of that handout as an illustration.

Among those young adults who consider themselves Catholic, which means they are affiliates, a majority say that they are fairly or very religious, that there is something special about being Catholic, and that being Catholic is an important part of who they are. However, fewer than half say that the Catholic Church is an important part of their lives and that they would never leave the Church. In other words, they distinguish between the Catholic faith, which they identify with and respect, and the Catholic Church, which they are less attached to. Although half say they are proud to be Catholic, only a tenth of young adult males have considered going into the priesthood, only 3 percent of males have considered becoming deacons, and only 8 percent of young women have considered religious life. Eight out of ten of these young adults believe that many religions can lead to eternal life. Only two out of ten believe that the Catholic Church is the one true church.

Eight out of ten also say there are many ways of interpreting Catholicism. They grant more authority to their individual experience than they do to the Magisterium. They stress the importance of thinking for themselves more than obeying Church leaders. Instead of simply embracing Church teachings and traditions, they tinker with them. In other words, using Eugene Kennedy’s terms, they tend towards “Culture II” Catholicism more than Culture I.

They distinguish between abstract beliefs and principles that they think are the core of the
Catholic faith and, on the other hand, more concrete norms and codes of conduct that they consider optional or peripheral. It’s not a clear-cut dichotomy. There are gradations and there are variations, but basically they believe that doctrines such as the Trinity, Incarnation, Mary as the Mother of God, Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist, and the need to be concerned about the poor are more important than teachings such as the need to limit the priesthood to men, the need for priestly celibacy, the Church’s opposition to artificial birth control or its opposition to the death penalty.

These young adults are most likely to agree with Church teachings related to those matters that they consider core and are most likely to disagree with the ones that they consider optional or peripheral. For example, they believe that there is a God, that the Scriptures are the Word of God, that there is a life after death, that people who lead good lives are rewarded in Heaven and those who are bad are punished in Hell, that miracles still happen, and that angels and demons are active in the world. They also embrace the Church’s views on economic justice and its concerns for the poor. But they disagree with the Church’s views on homosexuality, and they are sharply divided on whether abortion should be legal. They don’t mind if religious groups speak out on social and political issues, but they dislike any suggestion that to be a good Catholic, you must be either a Republican or a Democrat. As they see it, any attempt to equate their spirituality with one political party trivializes their faith.

In terms of religious practices, two-thirds or more marry Catholics, get married in the Church, and talk to God regularly. About a third go to Mass regularly. About a quarter go to confession at least once a year. Fewer than a quarter pray the Rosary, practice special devotions to Mary or the saints, meditate or read Scriptures, participate in Eucharistic Adoration, belong to Church organizations or activities such as Bible study, faith-sharing groups, or social justice groups, or participate in religious mission or service projects.

Thus, compared to young adults in the mid-1900s, they are half as likely to go to Mass, belong to a Church group, or engage in devotional practices. They also are less likely to choose religious life, and they are increasingly likely to disagree with the hierarchy on many issues, especially teachings having to do with sexual and reproductive ethics.

When we take all of these things into consideration, the religiosity of the so-called affiliates looks a little bit like a bell-shaped curve, with about 20 percent highly involved and very orthodox, about 60 percent somewhere in the middle, and another 20 percent who are uninvolved and reject many Church teachings, especially the ones that they don’t
consider central to their faith.

We don’t have as much data on the cradle Catholics who now say they are atheists, agnostics, or nothing in particular. But the data that we do have, such as some of the data at the bottom half of your handout, point to most of the same tendencies, only at lower levels. At least a quarter of them have religious inclinations, but they are more subjective than behavioral. They tend to believe in God and a life after death, but relatively few go to Mass regularly, pray daily, or read Scripture.

Next, how did we get into this situation? Church attachment increased between the early and the mid-1900s, because many social factors at that time supported religious involvement. Between 1900 and 1960, the percent of Americans who were married rose from 55 to 71 percent among males and from 57 to 67 percent among females. The number of kids went from 2.3 children in 1933 to 3.7 by 1957. Other factors included support of American social institutions, including religion, and a popular culture that reinforced traditional religious values. Those of you who are a little bit older, like me, remember that in the 1940s, movies like *The Bells of St. Mary’s* portrayed priests as handsome and virtuous, like Bing Crosby, and nuns as beautiful and loving as Ingrid Bergman.

A second reason is that conditions in the Church changed and increased young adults’ religious involvement. From the early 1900s to the mid-1900s, Catholics experienced a great deal of religious prejudice and discrimination and often turned to the Church as a refuge. The Church responded by creating an unparalleled network of parishes, schools, mutual aid societies that gave lay people seemingly endless opportunities to be involved. This was the biggest institution-building period in the history of the American Church. For the most part, the priests, the brothers, and the sisters who headed up these organizations were more educated, were considered holier than the laity, were believed to have more authority than lay people in matters of faith and morals, and used a combination of fear and guilt to produce conformity. Thus, Church leaders had a high degree of social control over lay people, and as they stressed Culture I Catholicism, they created high levels of attachment to the Church.

Young adults’ relationship with the Church has declined in recent decades, because many of the social factors supporting high levels of religious involvement have declined. Fewer and fewer young adults are married by the time they are in their late twenties. More are still single, living with their parents or living together. Those who get married are having
fewer kids and are having them later.

Young adults have more cynical views of social institutions and institutional leaders. As Chris Smith says in his book *Souls in Transition* and Bob and David claim in *American Grace*, today’s young adults are surrounded by a popular culture that’s saturated with sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Although Chris doesn’t frame the issue in generational terms, Bob and David and I do. Although popular culture still has distinctly religious elements, overall it doesn’t encourage religious involvement as much as it did back in the 1940s.

Other explanations have more to do with conditions in the Church itself. For one thing, Catholics have experienced more upward mobility and cultural assimilation than any religious group except Jews. Today’s Catholics don’t experience as much prejudice or discrimination, have more worldly resources, are more fully integrated into American society than previous generations of Catholics. They don’t think of the Church as a refuge as much as their grandparents did. As a result, the American Church is going through the biggest institution-closing period in its history, shutting down more elementary schools, high schools, colleges, universities, convents, seminaries, and parishes than it is opening.

The Church also has changed theologically. During Vatican II and in its wake, the Magisterium professed a mixture of Culture I and Culture II Catholicism. Fear and guilt were deemphasized, and the clergy and laity increasingly saw themselves as being equal in status and religious authority. Since the late 1970s, the Magisterium has reemphasized Culture I, including the belief that clergy are holier than the laity, the belief that the clergy have more authority in areas of faith and morals, and the use of fear and guilt. However, the hierarchy has less control over the beliefs and practices of the laity, which has continued its movement toward Culture II Catholicism. As a result, young adults’ relationship with the Church is more like what it was a hundred years ago than what it was fifty years ago.

But some young adults are more involved and more traditional than others. Why is that? Because they have very different social and cultural experiences. Twenty to 25 percent have experiences that predispose them to religious involvement, that make relationships with the Church plausible, and that lend themselves to Culture I Catholicism. They are somewhat more likely to be female, married, have kids of their own, believe social institutions are good and trust institutional leaders, and have pro-religion lifestyles. They view the Church as a refuge from religious prejudice and discrimination, have attended Catholic schools and other Catholic institutions, have been raised in the context of Culture
I Catholicism, and believe the clergy have more authority and control on religious issues than lay people. This is where I put the evangelical Catholics that Bill Portier talks about.

But many more affiliated and unaffiliated young adults are in situations that discourage religious involvement, make the relationship with the Church unlikely, and lend themselves to Culture II Catholicism. These young adults are more likely to be male, single, living with someone, have no kids, cynical about social institutions, don’t trust leaders, and are part of the sex, drugs, and rock and roll culture. Having experienced little or no religious prejudice and discrimination, they are integrated into the society and have no reason to view the Church as a refuge. They have had little or no Catholic schooling or experience in other Catholic institutions. They were taught the Culture II Catholicism and assume that they have just as much responsibility for their thoughts and actions as the clergy do.

Race and ethnicity also must be taken into account. Two things are very clear. One is the increasing size and influence of young Latinos. Our 2005 study showed that 39 percent of self-identified Millennial Catholics were Latinos. Pew says 45 percent. The Institute on Faith and Life puts the Latino figure at 48 percent. Putnam and Campbell put it at 58 percent. If it’s anywhere in that range, it’s an important development.

The second thing is that racial and ethnic differences matter. Asians and whites are more likely than blacks and Latinos to be registered members of a parish. Among parishioners, Asians are the most involved and most traditional, followed by Latinos, whites, African-Americans. Young Asian parishioners are the most involved and most traditional, young Latinos are second, young whites are third, and young African-Americans are the least involved and least traditional.

Finally, what can we do? My explanation of the curvilinear trend line suggests that our predecessors increased young adults’ involvement by responding to the conditions in the society and in the Church at that time. They benefited from early marriages, large families, positive attitudes towards social institutions and leaders, popular culture that reinforced religious involvement, and immigrants needing a refuge. They also built a refuge that people were looking for. They tried to meet people’s social needs. They taught a type of Catholicism that satisfied the laity’s spiritual needs, and they demanded and, for the most part, got compliance with Church teachings.

So rather than being overwhelmed by the problems that we face, we should be empowered
by our predecessors’ success and try to deal with the conditions in the world as well as they did in theirs. We don’t benefit from the social conditions that fostered the demand for reorganized religion in the first half of the twentieth century. We have new challenges to address. We must reach out to people who live in circumstances that discourage religious involvement. That means always trying to meet them and their needs in their present circumstances, and then, paraphrasing Reinhold Niebuhr, having the serenity to accept the things that we can’t change, such as young people’s tendency to marry later and all the things that follow from that, such as cohabitation and premarital sex; the courage to change the things that we can, such as young adults’ views of institutions and institutional leaders; and the wisdom to know the difference.

Some of the methods our predecessors used to reach out to young adults seventy-five years ago, such as providing parochial schools and mutual aid societies for victims of prejudice and discrimination, might still be effective in places where marginalized and low-income people are concentrated. But other things they did, such as using fear and guilt to produce conformity, aren’t good foundations for a healthy relationship between young adults and the Church in our time.

Finally, in my interactions with young adults I have learned some dos and don’ts. I think some of these things require thinking outside the box that Church leaders sometimes get themselves into.

Instead of approaching young adults as a problem, affirm them and approach them as a resource.

Instead of emphasizing the need to increase young people’s attendance at Church functions, stress their importance as fellow Catholics and the need to build relationships with them.

Instead of trying to impose an Anglo version of the faith on everyone, learn what faith and the Church mean to Latinos, African-Americans, Native Americans, and Asians.

Instead of doing all the talking and being on the defensive, just listen to young adults’ criticisms of and their disappointments with the Church.

Instead of tailoring any new initiatives to the lifestyles of the pastor and the staff, tailor them to the life circumstances of young adults. Seven p.m. Masses work much better than
seven a.m. Masses.

Do things with young adults, not for them. Use the latest digital and image-oriented technologies and websites created by and for young adults, but emphasize personal interaction and personal invitations, not bulletin inserts and generic announcements at the end of Mass.

Include multiple points of entry. Some people enter through prayer and study, others through activities and service. But also include legitimate points of exit. Don’t require long-term commitments. Make sure tangible benefits outweigh costs.

Emphasize core issues of faith, such as one’s relationship with God and how the Church supports it.

Treat all people and other faiths respectfully and charitably.

Emphasize a both/and approach to faith and morals, not an either/or approach. Young adults know that these are complex issues.

Instead of assuming that you know how young people have reacted to a particular event, include ways to get regular feedback from them. They will appreciate the fact that you even asked.

If we do these things, young adults will be attracted to the Church the same way they are attracted to good pizza.

Let me conclude by asking you to do something that will serve as a bridge between tonight’s program and tomorrow’s conference. I would like you to think of a parish or a program that is strengthening the relationship between young adults and the Church. As we continue our discussion, I would like you to write the name and location of that parish or that program on the card that’s on your seat or the sheet in the program if you have one. If you use the card to send a question up here, borrow one from someone who hasn’t used one. Put your name on the card if you want. On your way out of the session, put your cards in one of the boxes at the back of the auditorium.

Those examples that you give us may be an inspiration tomorrow as we explore ways of building a closer relationship between the Church and today’s young adults. Thanks,
everybody. (Applause)

PETER STEINFELS: Thank you very much, Jim. You can use those yellow sheets if you want. In the middle of the table as you exit, when you came in at the bottom of the stairs, there will be a box there to put those in. There will be more yellow sheets for those who are attending tomorrow’s events, throughout this meeting, for your ideas and your suggestions.

Our first respondent is Melissa Cidade. I said that two out of three of our panelists this evening were non-twenty-something scholars. You will have to guess at the one who is a twenty-something scholar. Melissa is a research associate at Georgetown University Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, much more familiarly known by its acronym CARA. At this leading institution for the study of the American Church, she directs the extensive surveys of Catholic education, of parish life, and of young adult Catholics. Her work includes recent analyses of Church engagement with the Millennials. Please welcome Melissa Cidade.

MELISSA CIDADE: Thanks for the opportunity to be here tonight. I want to pick up on a point that Jim made. Catholic institutions in the United States are designed to serve the populations who built them and do not necessarily serve future generations in the same way. Even the very idea of what it means to be Catholic has shifted since our great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers built the parishes, schools, credit unions, hospitals, and other Catholic institutions in this nation. In fact, if we use the same measures of what it means to be Catholic that were used to describe the people who built these institutions generations ago, we could get the impression that young adult Catholics are bad Catholics.

Consider the following statistics from our organization, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate:

- Millennials and Generation Xers are the generations least likely to report attending Mass at least once a month or more frequently.
- Millennials are most likely to strongly agree that one can be a good Catholic without going to Mass every Sunday.
- About three in four Millennial Catholics attend reconciliation less than once a year.
- More than seven in ten Millennial Catholics rarely or never attend Mass on Holy Days of Obligation.
- About six in ten Millennial Catholics say they do not ever pray the Rosary.
Does this change in practice infer a change in Catholic identity? Are these young adult Catholics not, quote/unquote, “real” Catholics, as some have surmised? I would argue that, instead, this change in practice signals that perhaps outdated Catholic institutions are poorly serving young adult Catholics.

Each of the statistics I just mentioned — and I’m sure we are familiar with them — describe an action associated with being Catholic. What if we look instead of the attitudes and beliefs of young adult Catholics? We see that a different picture of Catholic identity of young adults is presented. Consider:

· Millennials are more likely than Vatican II or post-Vatican II generations to say that they strongly agree that they look to the Church’s teaching when deciding what is morally acceptable.
· Millennials are as likely as other generations to report that their Catholic faith is the most important part of their lives.
· Millennials are more likely than Vatican II- and post-Vatican II-generation Catholics to agree that marriage is a calling from God and that marriage is a lifelong commitment.
· Millennials are as likely as other generations to believe in Real Presence in the Eucharist, to be satisfied with the leadership of Pope Benedict XVI, and to say that they would not be happy in any other church.

So what’s going on here? Millennial belief systems are remarkably similar to the generations of Catholics that preceded them. However, unlike previous generations, these beliefs are translating into different religious behaviors. Whether this is a product of an institutional mismatch with this generation or a cultural milieu that does not support religiosity, the result is still an exciting time in the Church. Millennials are coming of age at a time when Catholics have never been more socially and economically stable, politically engaged, and culturally acceptable. New technologies, like blogs, email listservs, and websites, that connect members of young adult groups create a unique opportunity to reach out to young adult Catholics in ways that are culturally and spiritually meaningful to them.

They are listening. The question, then, is, are we communicating the timeless and beautiful message of the Church in a way that is salient to them?

I close with Christ’s parable from the Gospel according to Matthew. A farmer went out to plant some seeds. As he scattered them across his field, some of the seeds fell on a
footpath and the birds came and ate them. Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The plants sprang up quickly, but they soon wilted beneath the hot sun and died because the roots had no nourishment in the shallow soil. Other seeds fell among thorns that shot up and choked the tender blades. But some seeds fell on fertile soil and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, even a hundred times as much as had been planted. Anyone who is willing to hear should listen and understand. This generation is that fertile ground, and we are called to plant the seeds. Thank you. (Applause)

PETER STEINFELS: Thank you very much, Melissa. Our second respondent is Robert Putnam, Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard. Of Robert Putnam’s many publications, which range from scholarly tomes to op-ed pieces, the best known may be *Bowling Alone*, a much-discussed analysis of a troubling decline in American civic associations. Most recently, he is the coauthor with David Campbell, who will be on tomorrow’s program, of *American Grace*, which Jim Davidson has referred to a number of times, subtitled *How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. It is now the go-to book on religion in America, filled with provocative ideas, telling vignettes of congregational life across the spectrum of religious faiths, and graphs that even the most sociologically challenged can understand. Please welcome Robert Putnam.

ROBERT PUTNAM: Thanks very much. I am really honored to be on this panel, and a little surprised. This is a panel on the sociology of young Catholics. I am neither Catholic nor young nor a sociologist.

I don’t have much time. There are many moving parts to the question of the future of the Church, and especially the role of young adults in the Church. There are many moving parts, and we have a lot of data, and I don’t have very much time. So I’m going to give the conclusions without giving the evidence that I normally would think would be mandatory to try to persuade you.

I’m going to focus primarily here on Anglo Catholics, not on Latino Catholics, for two reasons. One is that there is a very big difference. Secondly, our claims in *American Grace* and the Pew claims that talk about the hemorrhage of young Catholics are explicitly focused only on Anglo Catholics, not on Latino Catholics. I think the Latino Catholics are completely different, and I don’t see any hemorrhaging there at all. I do think that most of the debate is about what’s happening to young non-Latino Catholics.

I agree with much of Jim Davidson’s work. I admire his life work enormously, and I agree with most of what he said tonight. But I’m going to focus here on two things that I think
are wrong.

First of all, I think his account and, I have to say, Melissa’s account of the current status of the Church and young people are too optimistic — I’m inclined to say far too optimistic. I think the word, “hemorrhage,” that we use in our book is correct. I’m going to try to say a little bit about why I think we are underestimating the problem this evening.

Secondly, I think Jim gives perhaps too little attention to one important causal factor. As a rough rule of thumb, I believe that roughly two-thirds, not one-third, of people raised as Catholics in America are no longer practicing Catholics. One-third of the people raised as Catholics are still devout practicing Catholics. One-third of them no longer call themselves Catholics. That’s what Jim talks about. One-third of them still call themselves Catholics, but, I believe, are really not involved with the Church. They may be in some inspirational sense Catholic — maybe in their views — but they are not at all involved with the Catholic Church.

On the first point, Jim agrees basically about the first third, but he says that in all but name they are Catholics. And I disagree. I have looked very carefully at these people. Now, I’m talking about the first third, the people who no longer call themselves Catholics, some of whom say they are none of the above. They don’t practice any of the sacraments. Most important for the future, they are not raising their children as Catholics. They’re out the door and leaving the Church behind. They may be generically religious in their beliefs; some of them are generically religious in their beliefs. They believe in God, they believe in the Bible, and so on. But so do almost all Americans. Believing in God does not make you Catholic.

Did I say something heretical?

JAMES DAVIDSON: That was shocking.

ROBERT PUTNAM: The Church would be fooling itself if it thought of these people, who don’t think of themselves as Catholic, as Catholic.

But I want to talk mainly about the second third, the ones who still say they are Catholic, but are in name only. Behaviorally, of all twenty-somethings who self-identify as Catholics — I’m talking about only Anglo Catholics here. Some of the difference in the numbers that we are giving is that if you don’t separate Anglo Catholics and Latino Catholics, the Anglo
Catholics kind of benefit from the fact that the Latino Catholics are really very Catholic. So you have to pull them out in order to see what’s happening to the kind of vanilla Anglo Catholics.

Of all twenty-something self-identified Anglo Catholics, half of them virtually never attend Mass. Now, maybe you could be Catholic without ever attending Mass — I’m not talking about every week, but never attending Mass — but it’s a little hard to think of those people as being connected to the Church. They are very doctrinally unfaithful: Ninety percent of the group that I’m talking about — young Anglo self-identified Catholics — reject papal infallibility. Eighty percent of them favor female clergy. More than half favor gay marriage and then another 25 percent favor civil unions. So 75 percent of them, on the issue that is at the top of the Church’s social agenda in America today, are in dissent.

They are psychologically very secular. Again, the group I’m talking about here is twenty-something Anglo self-identified Catholics: Fifteen percent of them attend Mass regularly. Eleven percent say that religion is very important in their political decisions — 11 percent. Eight percent say that religion is very important in their family decisions, and zero percent, at least in our survey — now, this is a national sample — it’s not a huge sample, but it’s a national sample — zero percent say that it’s very important to them that their kids are raised as Catholic.

Maybe I’m off by five percentage points or ten percentage points, but that is a huge change. These are self-identified Catholics. These are not the none-of-the-aboves. These are people who are self-identified as Catholic, and maintaining their kids in the faith is basically a very low priority.

Many of these statements would be characteristic of other young Americans in other denominations. But the Catholic Church was very different and is now much like mainline Protestants in the degree of its reach into young America. This week is the fiftieth anniversary of a Catholic being sworn in as president of the United States. Compared to other Americans in 1961, Catholics were much more loyal to the faith of their fathers and much more likely to stay in the Church compared to other Americans. They were much less likely to intermarry. When they did intermarry, they were much more likely to win their spouse into the Church and they were much more likely than intermarried people in other faiths to raise their kids in the Church. So all of the kids born to those unions were coming into the Church. They were much observant — Catholics in 1961 were way more likely to go to church regularly than people of other
faiths. They were much more strongly identified with their faith and with their Church than other Americans were. They had larger families, and they kept more of their kids in the faith. This is a recipe for a growing, vibrant Church — deep involvement, large families, most of whom stay in the Church.

A half-century later, Catholics are indistinguishable from mainline Protestants and much less than evangelical Protestants on all these dimensions. Intermarriage is way up among Catholic kids. Conversions overall into Catholicism are way down. Observance is way down among young people. Inheritance of the faith is down, along with family size.

You could say, “Well, that’s also true of mainline Protestants. We’re not doing any worse than mainline Protestants.” But mainline Protestants are dying demographically. That’s not the standard that you want to hold yourself to.

I realize that I am over time and I still haven’t given you any of the data. But the spigots are turned off, both the internal Church spigot — that is, the kids who stay in the Church — and the external spigot — that is, converts into the Church. Those two spigots have been turned way down and the drain at the bottom has been turned open full. That’s a recipe for, over time, a declining fraction of the American population being Catholic, either in name or in name only.

Why is this? I’ll be much briefer here. I think there are two big master trends. Catholics have been assimilated into American society. They weren’t in 1961; they are now, both ethnically and religiously. Many were Catholic because they were Irish or Italian or Polish. As their ethnic identities fade over the generations, they become less Catholic, and Catholics have become much more like other Americans. Their intermarriage rate is like other Americans’. Their inheritance rate in terms of the Church is like other Americans’. It’s not like Catholics are any different from any other Americans.

But that’s important for the following reason. In a world in which you have to attract new members and not merely baptize them, that is, when you have to reach out and get new members — and that’s the world that the Catholic Church is living in now and that Protestant churches have been living in for some time — the following thing matters: Namely, the second part of the story is a growing discrepancy between the doctrine of the Church and the public image of the Church and the views of the laity. Birth control, according to Father Greeley, accounted for the beginning of this decline, the change in the Church, people leaving the Church over the issue of birth control. Now gender and
homosexuality and the culture wars all are separating the Church from its market. It
doesn’t any longer have a closed market. That’s the point I was trying to make.

Therefore, the discrepancy between the Church’s image and profile and what the laity,
Catholic or non-Catholic, believes matters much more if you’re in a competitive
marketplace with other religious and secular options.

So my point is that I think this is a really much more serious, threatening problem than
has been described so far.

I have two final, two-sentence qualifications.

One is, Latinos are an important part of the story. They are very numerous, and they look
a lot like ethnic Catholics in 1961 looked. They are more observant. They are more loyal.
They are more orthodox. They are much less likely to intermarry. They have large
families. They will keep the Church vibrant in the decades ahead, assuming that the
Church adapts and becomes a predominantly Latino institution. That will be fine. I’m not
Catholic, so I don’t have a stake in this. But I think it’s wonderful that the Catholic
Church is receiving all these Latino immigrants. If the Catholic Church didn’t exist, the
rest of us would have to invent something like the Catholic Church as a welcoming place
for Latinos. That’s great.

Finally, the Church is the most successfully adaptive organization in human history. It’s
an incredibly adaptive organization. So I wouldn’t bet against another period of major,
major reform in the Church that would put it in a different place. But I don’t think that
the Church helps itself by thinking that that kind of major reform is unnecessary.
(Applause)

**PETER STEINFELS:** Thank you very much, Bob. Knowing that we won’t be able to
exhaust such a rich topic in a mere half-hour or so, let me divide our discussion according
to the questions that Jim Davidson posed: Are the findings right? How should we
interpret them? How did we get into this situation? What, if anything, can we do about
it? I may have to jump from one to another a bit arbitrarily.

Are the findings right? How should we interpret them? I have to say, Jim and Melissa,
that I myself — without knowing, Melissa, what you were going to say — had in mind a
question having to do with pessimism versus optimism in your responses, and Bob
Putnam has taken care of raising that question. Now we can address it. But I would add that I recently read a new description of the difference between a pessimist and an optimist. The pessimist says, “Things can’t get any worse,” while the optimist says, “Oh, yes, they can.”

I leave it now to the panelists, starting with Jim and Melissa and then Bob. We may want to go back and forth, until we call a timeout or something, on this question of the situation.

JAMES DAVIDSON: Thank you. I do appreciate my colleagues and their input. I was drawing a little continuum here as Melissa and Bob were speaking. I was putting Bob on the most pessimistic end, suggesting that he is most negative or most likely to see what’s happening as decline. I had Melissa at the most optimistic end, suggesting that twenty-somethings are fertile ground and young, and not a problem at all. I don’t know whether this is correct or not, but I put myself more toward the middle and said Melissa’s right with regard to twenty-somethings and their orientations to the Catholic faith —

MELISSA CIDADE: I’m sorry, my boss is here. Could you say a little louder, “Melissa’s right”?

JAMES DAVIDSON: Melissa deserves a huge raise next year. I think she’s absolutely right with regard to her description of young adults and their tendency to believe, indeed some of their devotional practice, and so forth. I think their Catholic identity remains strong in relationship to their sense of their being Catholic. Where I think I would disagree a little bit with Melissa and side a little bit more with Bob is with regard to the issue of the Church side. Young people, while they are committed to the faith, are less attached to the Church. And I do think that is a problem. I think I have tried to point that out in my previous work, where we have made distinctions between Catholic identity and commitment, and found that young adults are less committed to the institutional Church.

That’s what we’re trying to deal with: To what extent does the Church invest itself in young people and support young people and reach out to young people? There, Melissa is saying, I think, not as much as they should. I agree with that.

We also need to be concerned about those young people who do believe and are people of faith, but who don’t show any inclination to support the Church or be a part of the Church or invest their time and their talent in it. In Bob’s terms, that is a challenge for us. That is
something of a crisis.

**PETER STEINFELS:** Before Melissa gets a shot at this, I want to point out that both of you make a distinction. Jim, you make a distinction between faith and the Church, and Melissa, you made a distinction between beliefs and attitudes, and actions. I want to raise some suspicion about both of those distinctions and whether, in fact, it isn’t actions that count rather than the nice things that people say when they are asked questions about it. It’s very nice for me to say that I rate as high among the things that really count in my faith that God is in the sacraments and Jesus is really present in the Eucharist, but then if I never go to Mass, what does that really mean about that belief? Melissa?

**MELISSA CIDADE:** I appreciate your bringing that up. I think what I’m trying to point out here is that we are at a moment of opportunity. These folks are not lost, as Jim mentions. They have attitudes and beliefs that are ripe, but there is a mismatch, an institutional mismatch. I know there’s a tendency to say that Catholics in general are not coming to Mass because of — pick your hot-button reason — because of homosexuality, because of birth control, because of pedophilia, yada yada. We just don’t find that that’s true in our data. We find that young adults are most likely not to come to Mass because they don’t get out of bed, don’t think it’s important, have other things going on, et cetera.

So what am I saying here? Yes, there is some fertile ground there and I think there is the opportunity there, but we as a Church are not reaching out to that opportunity. We’re obviously not speaking to them in a way that’s salient, that’s getting them out of bed. It’s our responsibility to reach out to those folks. One way to do that is to tap into these shared beliefs that they already have.

**PETER STEINFELS:** Bob, did you want to —

**ROBERT PUTNAM:** I took more than my fair share the first time around. The only thing I want to call attention to — and I don’t think the other two speakers have yet taken this on board — there are two ways to become a member of a particular faith, whatever the faith is — Mormonism or being Jewish or being Catholic or whatever. One is to be born into it and the other is to be persuaded into it. The Catholic Church relied on the first door for most of its existence in America. There was some conversion. But conversion in to the Catholic Church is way down and is actually now, compared to any other religion, actually pretty unimportant.
In that context, intermarriage and the persistence of mixed marriages, which are now and will be even more common, and the view that it isn’t a big deal if your kids don’t end up being Catholic — if the Church is relying only on the birth door and not relying on the conversion door, that’s a serious problem, and that’s a serious long-run problem. It’s not just that young Catholics say that it’s not a big deal for them if their kids don’t become Catholic. Think about the implications of that, not about their own state of faith or grace or mind, but about what it means for the Church, if the Church is relying on birth as the only door into the Church.

If you think the Church is going to have to, as I do — forget about growth; if it’s going to stay constant among Anglos, it’s going to have to rely much more on conversions. When you talk about conversions, it matters what product you’re offering. That’s what the evangelicals have known and that’s why have they have, relatively, succeeded. The mainliners have not known it, and I’m not sure the Catholic Church realizes that problem.

**MELISSA CIDADE:** I adore you and wish I had brought my *Bowling Alone* book that you could have signed for me, but I have to disagree. We at CARA have other data that suggest otherwise. We have data that suggest that young adults think it is important that their children are raised in the Church. They find that to be important. They just don’t have kids yet. So it’s perhaps not translating as directly as it may have six years ago.

**ROBERT PUTNAM:** And you say that of Anglo Catholics, not just the Latinos? I know the numbers for Latinos are very high and the numbers of Anglos are much lower.

**PETER STEINFELS:** We can get to Latinos in a minute. That’s an important thing. I want —

**ROBERT PUTNAM:** But I want to make sure that we’re comparing apples and apples here. When she says that they do care about their kids in the Church and I say they don’t, I want to make clear that we’re talking about Anglos, and not the mix.

**MELISSA CIDADE:** I’m sorry I don’t have those data in front of me right now. But we also find that the baptism rates are not going through the floor right now. We have just recently run some demographic data on this, and we have no reason to suspect that baptisms are going to take some kind of massive fall or are in the process of taking a massive fall. We have looked at *The Official Catholic Directory* and some other polling data and whatnot over the past number of years. In fact — and here’s a shameless plug —
we have a new blog, nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com. It has some little data points that we pull out. One of the most recent postings is on this demographic trend. Are Hispanics propping us up? That’s essentially the question. It’s kind of an unfair question. As someone who comes from a background of non-English-speaking parents and grandparents, it’s an unfair question. But it’s also not true, we find, demographically. Again, I’m sorry I don’t have that with me.

PETER STEINFELS: Jim, do you want to say something?

JAMES DAVIDSON: I just want to make the observation that sociologists would distinguish between a church and a sect and that a church, by definition, is more ascriptive and relies more on birth as one of its main characteristics. Sectarian groups are more evangelical by nature. That’s, in fact, what they are here to do. That’s their role. A Sunday morning worship service at the Assemblies of God is very different from a Sunday morning Mass at the Catholic Church, because one is more evangelical than the other.

We can describe the different findings, but to whatever extent we become at all prescriptive and suggest that the Catholic Church must become more sectarian, I get a little nervous at that point. It may be that the Catholic Church in the first half of the twentieth century had more converts. My father was one. My father was an Episcopalian and converted. He signed the paper. They got married in the side altar, not in the main church, and all that. But that success was accomplished through, to some degree, a force or requirement. In some way, the change that has taken place, even if it has taken us to a lower level of conversion, is more respectful of the other party and allows for greater interfaith exchange and dialogue. It may have other consequences that you may not like, but that’s a case where I’m not sure that the change is necessarily a bad thing.

PETER STEINFELS: I want to move to the subject of Latinos. We had a previous forum here called “Becoming Latino,” because we wanted to discuss a situation where Latinos are no longer asking for a fair place at the table, but, in fact, they are becoming the hosts at the table.

Two questions. One is, to what extent are the religious tendencies of Latino twenty-somethings different from those of non-Latino young adults? Bob, you have suggested that they are. I, in fact, remember reading some data that suggest that in many ways they are not so different. So I toss that question out.
Bob, you wrote about the tensions, in *American Grace*, in Catholic parishes undergoing a transition from older Catholic populations, Euro-immigrant populations, to Latino populations. So I toss out this question, too: Is there a danger that the new Latino influx, hopeful and valued in many ways that you simply stated in terms of American society, could spur a kind of “white flight” among young non-Latino twenty-somethings?

So there are two questions. The first is, are they really so similar or different? Bob, you had your say on that one, so I’ll let the other two panelists address that. Then maybe, Bob, you could take up this question of possible white flight.

**JAMES DAVIDSON:** The issue of Latino versus non-Latino — or Hispanic and Anglo — differences is something that has haunted researchers for at least a decade, if not longer than that. I have been a part of at least three or four books in which we have looked at the sort of affiliated Catholics. In looking at them and comparing Hispanic and non-Hispanic, the differences are relatively small. They are real, but they are not as dramatic as they are sometimes made out to be. I have participated in both English-only surveys and bilingual surveys, and found that bilingual surveys produce some greater differences. But, still, they are not enormous.

When I have tried to compare the effects of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and generation, my analysis is that the generational differences are greater than the racial and ethnic differences, meaning that young blacks, young Latinos, and young Anglos have a great deal in common, maybe more in common than they do with older people of their same race or ethnic background. So I think race and ethnicity are real and they make a difference in many respects, but they are not as important, perhaps, as some other variables, particularly generation. Gender makes less difference, it seems to me. If you look at our parishes, they are not riddled with division along gender lines so much as, perhaps, class lines or ethnic lines.

So I think there is a difference there. We do see a difference with regard to registration in parishes. If you look at the difference between the unaffiliated and the affiliated, rather than among the affiliated, then I think the racial and ethnic differences are greater. There is racism and there is ethnocentrism in the Church, and that shows up in the rates at which people are registered in parishes.

**PETER STEINFELS:** Melissa?
MELISSA CIDADE: I think in this case, when we’re talking about racial and ethnic identity and we talk about generation, we need to shift gears. We’re not talking here about Baby Boomers versus Millennials. We’re talking about first generation born in this country, second generation born in this country. At this point, as Bob mentioned, we are so far away from the influx of European Catholics that an Anglo is an Anglo, but we are not far enough away from an influx of Hispanics, where a Hispanic is a Hispanic. We have to think of that in terms of generation, not necessarily age generation, but how many generations of your family have lived here. Then we start to see that the further out you are from that landing generation, the more your young folks look like all the other young folks.

ROBERT PUTNAM: I agree completely with that.

MELISSA CIDADE: Say that louder/

ROBERT PUTNAM: What I really meant to say was that I think that’s one of the most brilliant insights I’ve heard. Shall I respond to that? I basically agree with that. It does depend a lot on whether you do the survey in English only, as many surveys have been done, frankly, or whether you do Spanish as well as English. Spanish-only speakers are much more likely to look like orthodox Catholics. Our survey was offered in Spanish, as well as in English.

I agree that there are important immigrant generational differences. I do think they are really substantial. One number I was just looking at was, if you ask Latino and Anglo Catholics, “How do you feel about women in the priesthood?” 45 percent of Latino Catholics say they don’t want women in the priesthood, compared to something like 25 or 26 percent of Anglo Catholics. And that’s illustrative of a substantially more orthodox set of views about the Church itself among Latinos.

White flight: I have mixed feelings about the role of the Church with respect to ethnic integration between Latinos and Anglos, Peter. I think it’s absolutely marvelous that the Church is doing that. I think it’s exactly the right challenge that any institution in America should be facing now, and the Catholic Church is much more facing up to that than any other institution in our country. So as an American citizen, I think that’s just unbelievably a good moral, just, helpful thing to do.

I think it is really challenging, however. That’s what we encountered when we went to
individual parishes. In the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago, which is where we did all these interviews, you can see churches that have been Latino for forty or fifty years, that have been Latino for ten years, that are in the midst of being both, that will be Latino in ten years, and you can watch them flip. I’m not going to name names, but we know it’s widely discussed that there is white flight — that is, that people —

MELISSA CIDADE: I am going to disagree with you, respectfully, and say that I have seen the phenomenon across the country of — it’s almost like two parishes under one roof. The Anglos aren’t leaving; they just have their own Mass and the Spanish-speakers have their own Mass.

ROBERT PUTNAM: I’m sorry, I’m quoting a senior official of the Chicago Archdiocese who describes white flight from a — and I won’t name the congregation — to another congregation, which is known to stay white. I agree that there is a split, two churches under one roof, but there is also white flight. I wish I could cite the particular parishes, but I won’t.

I suspect that’s going to be much less true, actually, among Millennials. Millennials in general — Millennial Catholics, Millennial Protestants, Millennial anybody — all Millennials are more comfortable with ethnic differences. So I don’t expect that Millennial whites are going to be fleeing the Church — that is, Anglos fleeing a parish that’s becoming Latino. The people who are doing the fleeing are the Catholics who are now in their sixties or seventies.

I think the Church has a good chance, actually, over time to build these bridges and to build a broader sense of “we.” That’s what I hope it will do. But again, it doesn’t do any good to hide the fact that it’s not easy. Doing diversity is not easy for anybody.

PETER STEINFELS: I want to move on here, because we only have limited time for more discussion before we get to questions from the audience. This is something that has to do with both how we got here and perhaps what we can do about it.

One of the recent changes that Jim mentioned several times and that seems most dramatic to me — and also, somehow, difficult to discuss — is the later age of marriage, the new possibilities for women, and the availability of fairly reliable contraception, all of which are related to premarital experience, cohabitation, and create a direct clash with Catholic teaching that, at least on paper, has been a matter of grave seriousness. I know
Bob’s book also makes the question of change in attitudes about premarital sexual experience an important pivot in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Jim, you appeared to list this as a development which must be taken as a given, without saying much more about it. I know that no one up here on this stage would claim to be a moral theologian. But it does not seem satisfactory that we neither ask young adults to change their manner of living nor ask the Church to modify its teaching, but just generally look the other way.

Any comments from any panelist? We’ll turn off the tape recorder. You don’t have to answer.

**JAMES DAVIDSON:** I think all I was suggesting is that I think the Church should speak prophetically to a whole variety of circumstances that have to do with the conditions that young people live in. It just seems to me, without being a moral theologian, that if sexuality comes into being in active ways at fifteen and you’re married by the time you are twenty-one, which was true in my cohort, that’s one situation. But if you are looking at a range between fifteen and thirty-five — my son just got married and he is thirty-six — you say to yourself that’s a whole different ballgame. If we are going to have to accept certain things, we have to accept some sense of what’s realistic, what is normal human behavior. Are we calling all young adult males and females to celibacy the way we’re calling priests? I don’t think that makes much sense.

I just think there is a challenge there that we have to accept and say, what can we do there if we can’t do much about that — if young people, in fact, are getting married later because they want to be sure of their careers, they want to bring more economic security to their marriages, they want to be wise, and the data show us that later marriages last longer than younger marriages? Then I am not about to start saying, let’s go back to pushing people to get married younger. I don’t want to go that way. I would rather settle with what we have and address other conditions where we have a greater opportunity to make some change.

**PETER STEINFELS:** Any other comments?

**MELISSA CIDADE:** I’m getting a reputation for being sunshine and unicorns. But at the risk of shooting myself in the foot, this is not an issue that I think we need to be focused on right now. Jim talked about in his presentation core and periphery. This is on
the periphery. This is like getting a lecture from your mom about not flossing. It's just not speaking to the spiritual core of these human beings.

**PETER STEINFELS:** I’m not sure about the core and the periphery here. What you are saying is what I think many twenty-somethings’ view of this is. It’s something that they compartmentalize.

**MELISSA CIDADE:** Yes.

**PETER STEINFELS:** You’re suggesting that we will just live with that.

**JAMES DAVIDSON:** I think many Church people are living with that. When you come and say, “We want to get married,” they go, “What’s your address?” “3 Smith Street.” “What’s your address?”“3 Smith Street.” Then you say, “Okay, let’s go from there.” I think it has become something of a non-issue in many quarters, for good reason.

**MELISSA CIDADE:** It’s also important to point out — I’m just going to remind us all of *Googling God*, Mike Hayes’s work, where he points out these moments of return, these moments in young adults’ lives where we have an opportunity as Church to reach them. This “3 Smith Street” is an opportunity to reach them. I think it’s important to focus on that moment of return. They are coming to the Church looking for a sacrament or looking for welcoming. That’s where I get into my core and periphery. I think it’s more important at that moment to say, “Welcome back, my prodigal son,” than it is to say, “Are you on the pill?”

**PETER STEINFELS:** Bob?

**ROBERT PUTNAM:** I want to make one purely sociological point, not a religious point at all. As a matter of historical fact, the change in norms about premarital sex predated the increase in the average age of marriage. That is, people began being freer about premarital sex long before they started delaying marriage. The change in patterns of premarital sexual behavior is not a response to later marriage; if anything, it’s the other way around. As you began to have premarital sex, getting married became less urgent. So it’s not that the age of marriage is the driver. It’s that the change of norms happened — actually, we know a lot about when it happened. It happened in about three or four years in the late 1960s, way before the change in age [of marriage].
Can I just make one general point about this issue? I believe in a prophetic church. I mean, I believe in the prophetic role of religion. That is, a religion often is called to say and assert important values that are contrary to the behavior of the society in which it lives, in which the Church is acting. So the last thing I’m saying is that all a church should do is to just go along to get along.

However, a church, like any other organization, has to choose its battles carefully. In our data — I’m not now just talking about the Catholic Church; I’m talking about all churches in America — I found it impossible to believe that people would be making their choice about what religion and whether to be religious at all on the basis of views about social and political issues. I couldn’t imagine that people were going to be hazarding the fate of their eternal soul on the basis of how they felt about Bill Clinton. It just didn’t seem to me — Bill Clinton is a nice guy, but why would I change my religious views about that? Religious views are core, I thought, and how I feel about Bill Clinton is periphery — or George W. Bush. I don’t mean to make this a partisan thing.

You can see in our data that people, when their religious commitments and religious identities are in conflict with their social and political identities, are as likely to change their religious identity to fit their social identity as the other way around. I don’t say that’s always true, and I’m not arguing for a purely market-driven church. But a church has to be thinking about what it wants to insist on and what it wants to phrase in a different way or deemphasize in order to try to save more souls.

**PETER STEINFELS:** I have a couple of other really bright questions that I hope to toss at the panelists. But I also have a large group of questions[ from the audience]. Many seem very good, and I’m sorry that we won’t be able to get to all of them. Some of them have been sent over by runners from McNally, and we’re very grateful for that.

To start off, tonight’s forum is called “The Known and the Unknown.” For each of the panelists, what is the great unknown? What would you like to find out about twentiesomethings and their religion if you had all the money and talent necessary to do the most sophisticated research possible? Who wants to begin?

**JAMES DAVIDSON:** That’s the question I posed to two bishops about fifteen years ago. I said, “I have an opportunity to do some research. What would you like me to find out for you?” These two bishops, in separate meetings, not talking to one another, both said the same thing to me: “Tell us about young people. Our lives are so much tangled up in
meetings and discussions, and we circulate so much among older people that we just simply don’t have opportunities to meet and get to know young adults.”

So part of what we did was to explore that issue. It was in that context that we opened up the issue of generations and switched the conversation a little bit, I think, from age differences, which suggested that people would just go through lifecycles, to generational differences, and that today’s young people are different from yesterday’s young people.

It seems to me that we still do need to know more about — we know a great deal about the affiliated and the self-identified young adult Catholics. We still do need to know some more about the unaffiliated and the Catholics who, in fact, have converted to some other faith. I know one fellow, for example, who converted to the Baptist Church with his wife, and after about five or six years, they both converted and are now in one of the most conservative Catholic parishes in our community. So there is at least some traffic going back and forth that way as well. So I think we need to know more about those who have chosen to go elsewhere, as well as the unaffiliated.

PETER STEINFELS: Melissa?

MELISSA CIDADE: Without any boundaries, I would want to know two things. The first is, what works or what will work? What will bring you back? What will bring you back to the sacraments? Maybe not to a parish — we can think about mission churches, we can think about centers, et cetera. What will bring you back is my first question.

My second question is, how many of you will we see again later in your lifecycle? I know that there is a lifecycle effect going on here, but we don’t know how much of it, it is. As Jim just said, past generations are not a predictor for future generations. So those would be my questions: How do we get you back? How many of you can we expect to come back on your own?

ROBERT PUTNAM: I want Melissa’s first question without the word “back.” That is, I think to say, “How will we get you back?” is to focus the Church’s attention only on people who were once Catholic, and I think that’s a limit that the Church is unlikely to be able to live with. A little less than a third of all young people in America today are “nones” — not Catholic sisters, but n-o-n-e-s. That is a huge market — a huge market. Most of them are not former Catholics. But why couldn’t they be Catholics? You see why I want to just strike the word “back.” How can we get them?
PETER STEINFELS: Bob, I would like to follow that up. In your book American Grace you have a very interesting point about a group you call “liminals.” I wonder if you could expand on that for a second, because it seems to me pertinent to what you just said.

ROBERT PUTNAM: It is. I avoided saying anything about it because I thought it might be too complicated. We interviewed people twice. Therefore, we can see that a substantial portion of all the people who tell you that they are nones this year will tell you that they are something next year. But they will be replaced next year by an almost exactly equally large number of people who this year told you that they were a something and next year will tell that they are a none. That is, they are kind of betwixt and between. So a substantial fraction of all of these nones are actually not really committed nones. They are not really committed none-of-the-aboves. They are certainly not committed atheists, for certain. For God’s sake, they’re not committed atheists. Thank you for laughing.

That might be consistent with Jim’s idea that there are a lot of those none-of-the-aboves who might really still think of themselves as Catholic. That’s true, but on the other hand, you have to look at the fact that there are a lot of people who still consider themselves Catholic this year who next year will tell you that they are none. There is a penumbra of nones around all the major denominations. About 10 percent, in round numbers, of every — if you say, “How many Methodists are there?” 10 percent of them are liminals. They’re going to tell you that they are a none next year. So there is a penumbra of 10 percent of nones around Methodists and — not so much around Jews, because it’s partly an ethnic term there — around Catholics, around evangelicals, around Baptists. You see what I’m trying to say? That is only a way of saying that what people actually tell you they are, whether they tell you that they are Catholic or don’t tell you that they are Catholic, is not the only relevant issue. It’s how they behave.

PETER STEINFELS: Next question: What are the five biggest misconceptions young people have about the Church? I think I’ll start with Melissa, if you want to try that one.

MELISSA CIDADE: I would say one of the biggest misconceptions — and, unfortunately, this misconception bears out in some places — is that, should they attempt to somehow get themselves into parish life, they won’t be welcomed or they will be scorned or they will be seen as catechetically undereducated or somehow not welcomed into the Body of Christ, the fullness of the parish life. I think it’s one of the reasons that they stay away.
PETER STEINFELS: Does anyone else have any — you don’t have to have five — any major misconception that you think needs to be pointed out right now? (No response)

I’ll move on to another question: What has been the trend in the percentage of conversions to Catholicism over the last half-century? Bob said something about that. But the second part of this is, has the sexual abuse crisis had any discernible impact on the rate at which Catholics are leaving the Church or converts coming in? Earlier, on the question of the trend, there seemed to be agreement that the trend was toward fewer converts. Bob emphasized that as a problem. Jim recognized the problem, but suggested that it might also reflect some developments that he valued and attitudes toward other religious groups.

But what about the second question about the sexual abuse crisis? Has that had any discernible impact on people leaving or —

MELISSA CIDADE: On conversions?

ROBERT PUTNAM: No, no. I think he means just in general. I think there are two separate questions.

JAMES DAVIDSON: I don’t remember anything in your data that said that in the last ten years, since the abuse scandal came up, we have seen a major drop-off.

ROBERT PUTNAM: Can I say one thing about the conversion issue? It’s important. Conversions to Catholicism are declining even though other factors should have made that not happen. More Americans are converting to something than ever before. So Americans are now moving around a lot; the Catholic Church is just not getting its share of those people moving around a lot. Many more Catholics nowadays are married to non-Catholics. That’s the standard way in which people converted to Catholicism, to match their spouse. There are many more people who are eligible to be converted, so to speak. Those two factors should have been making the Catholic Church’s conversion numbers go up, and instead they are going way down. That is, I think, the most interesting thing.

On the sexual abuse scandal, we didn’t study that in our book. I must say, just looking in general at these trends, they seem to me to be much more driven by basic demographic factors and by basic generational factors. I guess I would say, for some people, it may
have been the final nail in the coffin. Is that okay to use as a metaphor?

**PETER STEINFELS:** Jim?

**JAMES DAVIDSON:** You used the language of “drift” in your book, and people adrift. Melissa used it also. In our data I don’t see Catholics stalking out of the Church in anger over the sex abuse scandal or anything else. What I do see are people drifting or moving in and out of these categories, more depending upon the social conditions or circumstances at the time and whether they have just moved from college to their first job or something like that. The impact of the sex abuse scandal seems to me probably to be muted rather than significant.

In our earlier data, I think what we were arguing was that the gap was greatest between the pre-Vatican II generation and the Vatican II generation. What happened when young adults came into maturity in the 1960s was that they ran into two things. One was the 1960s, which led to a questioning of institutional authority and Vatican II at the same time. If Catholics are different from others, it’s the fact that they experienced this double whammy in the 1960s. Since then, the trend line has probably been even more linear than anything else.

**PETER STEINFELS:** I’m going to toss out a number of questions. The panel may want to exercise some natural division of labor among them.

One is how do the numbers of declining participation in America compare with the rest of the world?

Another question, of a very different nature, is, the presentation so far sounds like why or why not people belong to clubs or organizations. Yet the Church is supposed to be a collection of people who believe in Jesus, accept his teachings and example, and are grateful for his place in their lives. What happened to Jesus in the lives of Catholics or this presentation? Do twenty-somethings have any belief in Jesus, and does this make a difference in their lives? That’s an easy one.

I’ll give you a third one. This is a little hard to read, so I’m going to paraphrase it. It has to do with how important are what the questioner says are the crippling effects of today’s moral relativism as we look at why the numbers of young Catholics are declining.
So we have three things: international comparisons, a question of belief in Jesus, and the question of moral relativism as a force in this. That’s tossing the basketball up in the air.

**JAMES DAVIDSON**: I’ll start with the world. There are some data, and it seems to me that what I see in terms of comparisons is that what’s going on in the United States among young adult Catholics is similar to — with some differences, but similar to — what’s taking place among young Catholics in other First World countries. The data I see on Australia or England, Ireland, places like that point to the same general sorts of trends. It’s not so true among Second World and particularly Third World countries, where there seems to be more tradition, more compliance with traditional teachings, and when the opportunity exists at least, more participation. In addition to the comparisons of Catholics looking more like mainline Protestants in this country than they do like evangelicals or something, it looks like American young Catholics look more like First World young Catholics than they do Second World or Third World young Catholics.

**ROBERT PUTNAM**: Can I just — because I don’t want to try to answer the other two questions. I’m not a Jesus guy. I do have something to add. I entirely agree with what Jim said. The only thing I would add is that historically Americans were much more religious — that is, not historically in the way, way back, but over the last fifty or sixty years, Americans were beginning at a much higher level of religious observance than any of the people in Western Europe were. I agree completely that young people are following the same track down, but the down trend is actually somewhat sharper in the United States because we began at a higher level. In that respect, we look a lot like Ireland. American Catholics and Irish Catholics were quite observant. Actually, the decline in Ireland is even sharper than in the United States. But other than that, I agree completely. Our young Catholics look like young Catholics in any First World country.

**JAMES DAVIDSON**: Probably more like Australia. For Australia, the line may be a little bit more of a slope, whereas in Ireland in the U.S., it may look sharper.

**PETER STEINFELS**: I was wondering, Bob, though, if we toss the question about Jesus to Melissa, who may have some data about that, on the question about moral relativism — there are a number of questions here that we won’t be able to get to that do have to do with kind of a background cultural spirit, Zeitgeist or something, that makes — someone refers to Christian Smith’s studies showing that young people are not angry at religion; they’re just kind of blah, neutral about it — whether that’s related to the question about moral relativism. I wonder if you could address this question of the background.
MELISSA CIDADE: Let me just point out to you that there is one person sitting at this table who is officially of the Millennial Generation, and she is the only one who quoted the Gospels. I just want to put that out here. Keep that in your mind. I don’t have any data off the tip of my tongue about belief in following Christ. I would like to point out that Bob mentioned — and I think this is something to think about — just because you’re a follower of Christ, that doesn’t necessarily make you a Catholic. It’s something to think about.

I will also point out that we have this really neat advantage. If you talk to young adults, Catholic or otherwise, and you ask them to name religious icons or great religious leaders, they talk about St. Francis of Assisi, they talk about Mother Teresa, and they talk about John Paul II. Whammo, we’ve got three points right there. We have this identity that we can show multiple paths to Christ through all of these examples that we have in our Catholic litany of saints. And I think that’s a wonderful resource we can draw on.

JAMES DAVIDSON: Can I take a shot at the Jesus question? It may be a question of Jesus, but what I think may be more important, at least where researchers are concerned, is the whole question of God. The old saying used to be that you could tell the difference between a Protestant and a Catholic because the Catholic talked about God and the Protestant talked about Jesus. That’s the old line.

What’s important to me, I think, is that in my lifetime alone, the Catholic Church has radically transformed its image of God. One of the questions that we have tended to ask in a lot of research is, “Do you believe in God?” Eighty-five or 90 percent of people say yes. Then the question is, “What kind of God do you believe in?”

In the old days, in sort of Culture I Catholicism, that God was a harsh, judgmental God. In the last fifty years, in my lifetime, we have transformed God from being a judge to being an unconditional lover and a merciful, forgiving God.

If you look at today’s young people, both of those images are there, I think, but what’s not clear yet is exactly how those are distributed. I daresay that some of the younger more orthodox, more traditional, more conservative Catholics — the 20 or 25 percent that I was talking about — may have more of a traditional image of God as being a harsh judge. The younger people, the half to two-thirds, who are drifting or outside may think of God as a forgiving God and may not be as tough on themselves in that regard.
If you ask me whether I like that change, I would say that’s for the good. Whatever its other sort of behavioral implications have been, it seems to me that that is a healthier concept of God and a change that does not represent decline.

ROBERT PUTNAM: I have a complex view about the issue of moral relativism among younger people today. I risk misleading you if I abbreviate it, but I will. I understand the need for abbreviation. I do think that there is less concern nowadays than there used to be — and I don’t blame young people for this at all. I think it’s the fault of older people, people my age, actually, who have not successfully imparted a sense of some issues as being profoundly moral — maybe religious, but certainly profoundly morally important.

Actually, in the prolife/pro-choice debate, I’m a middle-of-the-road kind of person, but I think that you have to say that the people who have raised that issue from the prolife point of view have successfully morally complexified the issue. Among other things, young people are now not hostile to choice and they are not opposed to the whole idea of abortion, but they are more likely than their mothers or grandmothers were to see that as a morally complex issue and to think it’s not such an easy call. It’s actually complicated for me to say this, because I’m actually on the other side of the issue politically, but I do think that the Catholic Church and evangelical churches should think of that, from their point of view, as a success story, in which they have successfully persuaded younger people that that is a serious moral issue, with complicated considerations on both sides. And that’s great. It’s an interesting example. It suggests to me that young people are not tone-deaf to moral issues. But there are a ton of other issues. I don’t think that’s the only moral issue in society today.

I grew up, actually, as a Methodist. I’m a Jew now, but I grew up as a Methodist. I remember my Methodist pastor, in the late 1950s — the Civil Rights Movement was coming on. This was a very conservative town and a conservative guy. It was conservative. He said racism is a sin. And that echoed for people of my generation. It was a powerful thing to say. It said that there is a connection between your personal ethical fate and this issue of racism.

When was the last time you heard anybody say poverty in America or inequality in America is a sin? I don’t hear any church — actually, maybe the Catholic Church a little bit more than other churches, but not nearly as much as it’s emphasizing homosexuality and abortion and so on — saying, “Look, this is a sin.” I don’t want to impose my own political views on you, but I’m trying to indicate that the Church has, in effect, chosen one
issue to try to change people’s views, to be prophetic about — and it has had some success in that — but ignored a whole bunch of others.

PETER STEINFELS: We have really arrived at the end of our time this evening, with many questions, I’m sure, still in our minds, and many good ones just scattered all over this podium here, and I suspect some others have been collected that didn’t even get up here. We hope that many of these questions will be explored further in tomorrow’s program. Your program lists all the sessions, which begin promptly at 9:45. Please come earlier. I believe the doors open and the check-in begins at 8:45.

We look forward to seeing all of you who are registered either here in Pope Auditorium or in McNally. We hope that those who are not registered can take their chances as walk-ins. And if the weather is bad, you’ll have a very good chance. They can check the full videotape or transcribed proceedings when they become available at http://www.fordham.edu/lost or at the websites of the Curran Center on American Catholic Studies or the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture.

More information about these two centers at Fordham is available at the tables on your way out. If you wish to be informed of future events by either of them, please leave your names and email or snail-mail addresses there.

I have been corrected here. The first session opens at 9:30, not 9:45. The doors open at 8:45, but the first session tomorrow morning is at 9:30.

I was just saying that you can leave your email or snail-mail addresses to be informed of future events. Our Fordham Center on Religion and Culture is organizing a symposium on art and religion intriguingly entitled, “Dead or Alive? The Mystery of the Man of Sorrows,” for the afternoon and evening of March 18.

Now, to close this forum, I know you will all join me in expressing our great gratitude to James Davidson, Melissa Cidade, and Robert Putnam. (Applause)