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A RESPONSE TO JAMES D. DAVIDSON

James Davidson asserts that the generational fires in which American Catholics are formed in our adolescent years give rise to differences among us about what constitutes a good Catholic, what commitment to the Church requires, and the locus of Church authority. These generational differences surpass those stemming from age, race, and gender. I identify three implications of his research for us as *individual theologians* coming to terms with our respective generational identities, as a *collective theological society* charged by Davidson with cultivating generational pluralism, and as *teachers of theology* who stoke the fires of faith for the Millennial generation. Before exploring these, allow me to make a disclaimer. I have felt paralyzed at various points in preparing this response by a wariness of implying that *my* generational perspective on what it takes to be a good Catholic or what constitutes authentic theological praxis is somehow normative for all in my Post-Vatican generation. But conversations with many of you in my generation—often in intentionally intergenerational contexts provided, for example, by the Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women in Baltimore, the New Voices Seminar for women in theology at the Center for Spirituality at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, or the New Wine New Wineskins initiative in moral theology at the University of Notre Dame—assured me that this sense of responsibility and wariness are in and of themselves a reflection of my generational location and self-understanding as a theologian. Emboldened by the encouragement of my generational peers, I comment here from my own experience with an awareness that my gender, race, geographic location, and my generation certainly shape but do not prevent me from critically engaging Davidson's work.

BELIEF AS "SOCIAL GLUE" OF THE INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY

Davidson's research reminds us of the practical importance of rigorous reflection on the tradition for the non-academic members of this intergenerational Catholic family of ours. I am struck by the critical role that theologians play in fueling the various generational fires which give rise to the distinct self-understandings of American Catholics. For example, what Davidson describes as the Vatican II generation's shift from "passively complying with Church teachings" to "taking more responsibility for their own faith and following their individual consciences" depended largely on similar shifts in the work of Pre-Vatican II theologians such as John Courtney Murray in religious freedom or Avery Dulles in ecclesiology. We also can trace the roots of my Post-Vatican II

generation's emphasis on "individualism and voluntarism" to the theology of the generation which preceded us. Those who constitute the majority of the CTSA, namely the Vatican II generation, lift up individual experience as an invaluable source of theological inquiry as evidenced by the scholarship of feminist and liberationist theologians. They also emphasize individual agency and social responsibility in Christian discipleship, which has since become a recurrent theme in areas of moral theology and ethics. In short, I was assured that our work as theologians is relevant beyond footnotes in academic journals or paper presentations at academic conferences, another concern that marks my generation.

However, Davidson's conclusion regarding the centrality of doctrinal beliefs as the "social glue" that binds the generations raises two yellow flags. In many ways, he and I share the first of these flags. If the source of our intergenerational stickiness and "stick-to-it-iveness" in the American church rests with assent to doctrinal truth, then the impasse between what he and others describe as largely "Culture II" theologians the predominately "Culture I" ecclesial hierarchy becomes even more charged and difficult to navigate. Paul Lakeland has said as much when he notes that "doctrine is formulated by bishops with no formal input from anyone else and even more unfortunately, with very little attention paid by the magisterium to the collective wisdom of the theological community."[1] Moreover, in an informal study of the terminal degrees of the U.S. Bishops, Kathleen Dolphin expresses concern about the level of theological education the episcopate brings to their independent and increasingly isolated reflections on the "signs of the times".[2] These observations lend urgency to next year's convention theme, "Impasse . . . and Beyond," as well as the importance of continued intergenerational engagement on this issue.

I raise a second yellow flag regarding Davidson's conclusion that agreement on the content of faith (the Trinity, Incarnation, and Resurrection; Mary as the Mother of God; the "real presence" in the Eucharist, and concern for the poor) serves as the most viable "social glue" which binds the generations. This emphasis on doctrinal content potentially creates an understanding of faith as assent to a particular set of creedal convictions rather than as a committed way of life. It also contributes to the ongoing privatization of faith in our already hyper-individualized cultural. In other words, we either associate faith with private affirmation of beliefs with few social implications or we relegate faith to issues of private choice and concern. For example, I see this tendency toward privatization reflected in the criteria Davidson and his colleagues use in determining what "constitutes a good Catholic." Questions about regular mass attendance or

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[1]Paul Lakeland, *Catholicism at the Crossroads: How the Laity can Save the Church* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 8.

[2]Kathleen Dolphin, PBVM, "Grace-Full Balance or Precarious Wobbling?: Church, Academy and Spirituality in Tension," (paper presentation at the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Los Angeles, June 9, 2007).

attitudes about the poor, as well as the more common questions about contraception, abortion and marriage can reinforce the sense that what it takes to be a good Catholic can be limited to "private" and "pelvic" practices and issues. This kind of limited thinking about faithful discipleship contributes to what Margaret Farley has called the scandal of single issue politics.[3] At this particular juncture in American Catholic history, we need more constructive thinking about faithful citizenship that incorporates Catholic commitments to human flourishing into the public discourse.

Theologians could contribute to this epistemological shift from *faith statements* to *faith practices* by committing ourselves to critically engaging ways that persons live faith (orthopraxy), as well as the intellectual and theoretical content of that faith (orthodoxy). Even sociologists of religion have a role to play in this shift. For example, perhaps Davidson's research could incorporate more questions regarding the practices of faith: alternative prayer and worship practices, volunteer or advocacy work, or faith-based activities in the public square. This would offer a more accurate baseline for determining where American Catholics stand in regards to practices that shape our identity. In addition, it would be interesting to see how the generations might respond to questions regarding war, poverty, immigration, or environmental stewardship in light of what it means to be a good Catholic. Moreover, these kinds of questions become particularly insightful if we consider the rich, practical piety and social justice-oriented discipleship of Hispanic Catholics, whose demographics and experiences of both church and society challenge some of Davidson's generational markers. Their ongoing contributions have long-influenced the Church in this country and their influence will only increase given predictions that they will constitute one third of the American Catholic population by 2050.[4]

THE GENERATIONAL FIRES OF THEOLOGICAL FORMATION

My second point involves Jim's hypothesis regarding the emergence among younger theologians of the more theologically and politically conservative Culture I Catholicism that seeks "a more constructive response to the demise of a coherent Catholic subculture." I agree that this development—along with the implications of the differences among the generations—demands further investigation, particularly in terms of what these implications mean *within the academy*. One way of exploring both Davidson's hypothesis regarding the importance

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[3]Margaret Farley, "The Church in the Public Forum: Scandal or Prophetic Witness?" in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 12: The Catholic Church, Morality and Politics*, eds. Charles Curran and Leslie Griffin (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 205-223.

[4]Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "A Portrait of American Catholics on the Eve of Pope Benedict's Visit to the U.S." 27 March 2008 ⟨http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=29⟩.

of generational difference would be to apply his analysis of our respective generational formations as *Catholics*, to an analysis of the differences in our generational formation as *Catholic theologians*. In other words, it might be helpful to consider various conditions that fuel the formative fires in the early years of one's theological vocation in order to understand more fully the generational differences among us. These years certainly come later than the adolescent period which Jim examines, but are no less significant in terms of the maturation process of individuation and self-identity. The psychological impact of dissertation proposals, separation from dissertation mentors, the job search, and the affirmation-seeking nature of the tenure process certainly have much in common with the growing pains of my adolescent years.

Three factors might give us a better understanding of each generation's ideas about what it means to be a *good Catholic theologian* and *what constitutes good Catholic theology*. Let me briefly say something about each of the three, admittedly from my perspective as a Post-Vatican II theologian. I do so with the hope that this will assist us as a theological society in attending to what Davidson identifies as the potentially growing generational gap among theologians and in following his advice that each generation "puts itself in the place of the other."

Driving Questions

First, in his Presidential Address on the 50th Anniversary of the CTSA, Roger Haight comprehensively mapped the distinct characteristics of theology in those first 50 years.[5] I will not repeat his fine analysis other than to note that he implies that Pre-Vatican II theologians largely asked: *What does the Church have to say to society*? This driving question stems from what Davidson describes as the immigrant and outsider mentality of the Church when this generation came of theological age. Pre-Vatican II theologians such as Murray, Dulles or even John C. Ford were concerned with articulating the significance of Catholic doctrine for the lives of American Catholics attempting to assimilate into American culture, as well as with adjudicating the relationship between the church and the state.

Much of the theological reflection of the Vatican II generation, on the other hand, is shaped by inquiries surrounding *what does society have to say to the Church.* This is largely due to what Jim has identified as their generational formation in an age that desired authentic identity, and encouraged participation in cultural revolutions and civil rights movements. The majority of the membership in this theological society brought this search for authentic identity and desire for participation in the life of the church to their theology. We rightly attribute them with successfully challenging and expanding the previously nar-

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[5]Roger Haight, "Presidential Address: The First 50 Years of Theology," *CTSA Proceedings* 50 (1995): 1-14.

row expressions of Catholic identity, understandings of Catholic doctrine, and avenues for lay engagement in the church and theology.

Those of us in Post-Vatican II generation, who Haight has yet to assess, are voluntary Catholics and inherit a strong sense of historical consciousness from our immediate predecessors. These factors, combined with our professional formation in a variety of "posts"—post-Modernism, post-civil rights, post-Bernardin, post-Reaganomics, post-Salvadoran martyrs, post-Gulf War I, post Rwanda, post-9/11, post-Katrina—creates a "post-ness" in our theology not necessarily in the *chronological sense* but rather in the *figurative sense*. We seek "after" the meaning of these events, or chase after the implications of these things for theology as well as for society at large.[6] In other words, theology becomes an inclusive way of making sense of the practical implications of these events, not just for Catholics but also for all persons, particularly those who stand in the shadows of our more recent national and ecclesial history. This points to a practical or ethical undercurrent in much of our work in the different subdisciplines of theology, or what I call the "*So what*?" question that drives our scholarship.

Conversations with colleagues as well as a perusal the *Proceedings of the Annual Convention* since 1991 (the earliest year in which my generation would have participated in the annual convention) reveals that this "*So what*?" question has moved Catholic theology into unexplored and interdisciplinary territories of pop and visual culture, critical race theory, ethnography, community organizing, public policy, human development strategies, and even back into the original sources of the tradition. These moves have not occurred without some reservations regarding the theological grounding or integrity of this scholarship on the part of theologians in the previous generations.

Site of Academic Theology

The physical space where we do our theology also contributes to the differences in our theologies.[7] Pre-Vatican II theologians came of age as theolo-

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[6]Johann Baptist Metz describes the "post-ness" of his political theology in similar ways. See his essay, "The New Political Theology: The Status Quaestionis," in A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 23-29; and *Hope Against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust*, eds. Ekkehard Schuster and Rienhold Boschert-Kimming, trans., J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1999). However, I see Post-Vatican II theologians in this country expanding political theology beyond the implications of these interruptive events for Christians and Christian churches to consider their significance for all persons in an increasingly multicultural and interreligious public square.

[7]Here I find Michael Buckley's reflections on the contested praxis of Catholic universities quite insightful. See *The Catholic University as Project and Promise: Reflections on a Jesuit Idiom* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1998). See also Anne

gians in seminaries or local Catholic colleges established by religious orders. Both sites reflected much of the immigrant sub-culture in which they were located, which in turn influenced the theology in which this generation experienced their professional adolescence. Haight, for example, defines theology in this location as "a speculative analytic discipline closely tied to Church authority" and "concerned less with critical questioning and more with dissection of meaning."[8] Anne Clifford suggests that during this period "the goal of Catholic [institutions of] higher education was to encourage their graduates to preserve their faith and to maintain loyalty to institutional Roman Catholicism."[9]

Vatican II theologians came of theological age during what David Brooks has described as the cultural shift in the 1960s from a *pedigreed* elite to an *educated* elite as campus gates at elite colleges, "were thrown open on the basis of brains rather than blood."[10] The ensuing golden age of Catholic higher education coincided with the throwing open of the windows of the church on the basis of baptism and not holy orders. The university—the center of revolutionary, empowering and anti-establishment intellectualism—became the ideal site for what Haight calls the "a theology that dialogues with the world."[11] He characterizes theology in this site as "reformulation of doctrine, commitment to historical consciousness, a turn to experience as a medium of God's Spirit, and breakdown in credibility of Church authority."[12] Here, he notes that *American* theologians articulated an *American* theology through a variety of engagements in the wider culture. The fertility of this site is reflected in the many contextual theologies which have become mainstream in the academy.

However, as *intellectual capital* emerged as the new *social capital*, so too did the highly competitive market of higher education in which my generation now comes of theological age. Catholic institutions are among the biggest shareholders in this market. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, between 1980 and 2005 enrollment in Catholic universities increased 60.9%.[13] The constant striving for prominence, prestige, and preeminence

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Clifford's presidential address to the College Theology Society in 2008, "The Question of Catholic Identity at Catholic Colleges and Universities: An Invitation to Expand our Horizons," in which she offers and account of the evolution of Catholic theology in the unfolding identities of Catholic colleges and universities. Forthcoming.

[8]Haight, 2.

[9]Clifford, forthcoming.

[10]David Brooks, *BoBos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 29.

[11]Haight, 6.

[12]Ibid.

[13]As reported by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities in reference to a 2004 Integrated Postsecondary Data System study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics ⟨http://www.accunet.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageID=3513#students⟩.

coupled with the astronomical cost of a college degree create distinctive conditions in which contemporary theologians mature as scholars. For example, perhaps to an unprecedented extent, a Catholic institution's excellence, much like that of its secular counterparts, is frequently quantified and measured by the scholarly productivity of the faculty. The standards for tenure in theology increasingly mirror those in humanities and sciences, and usually incorporate evaluation by scholars outside the field of theology who possess little understanding of our discipline. Theologians are increasingly responsible for upholding the contested Catholic identity of our institutions both through the orthodoxy of our teaching and scholarship, and through collaboration with constituencies across our institutions, continually hashing out what it means to be a Catholic institution of higher education. These conditions lend themselves to a paranoia that our tenured colleagues may not have experienced in their professional adolescence—that our theology be *academic enough* to meet the increasingly competitive standards of excellence put forward by our institutions, that our theology be *theological enough* to meet the intellectually rigorous expectations of our Vatican II colleagues now in positions of academic influence, and that our theology be the "*right kind of Catholic*" to meet the very different demands of our secular colleagues, as well as the Culture I and Culture II Catholics connected to our respective institutions. This is a tall order for those coming of professional age in today's theological academy.

Relationship To The Sensus Fidelium

Finally, each generation is formed by the relationship it has with the wider *sensus fidelium* or quite simply the objective understanding of the faith held by the Church.[14] Pre-Vatican II theologians faced little ambiguity in engaging both the hierarchy of the church as well as the laity in shaping the *sensus fidelium* if only because magisterial authority was largely undisputed, theologians were largely clerical and therefore necessarily pastoral, and the distinct charisms of laity in the Church had yet to be clearly defined. The Vatican II generation enjoyed at least the Second Vatican Council's promise of openness and engagement both with the hierarchical church and the laity as their theological vocations were forged. Members of that generation even saw that promise fulfilled in certain instances where their theological expertise was welcomed and shaped the *sensus fidelium.* Theologians collaborated on bishops' documents, participated in lay movements such as Call to Action, or created various institutes and initiatives

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[14]Here, I draw on observations made recently by two Post-Vatican II theologians: Angela Sendander, "An Identity Crisis in the Church: A Challenge for Catholic Individuals and Institutions in U.S. Public Life," and Carolyn Weir Herman, "The *Sensus Fidei* and Lay Authority in the Catholic Church," (paper presentations at the annual meeting of the College Theology Society, Newport, RI, June 1, 2008).

of practical theology established by archdioceses and universities such as the Common Ground Initiative, or institutes of peace and justice studies and ecumenism. However, perhaps more than other generations, Vatican II theologians also acutely experience the disappointment and frustration of promises unfulfilled or dreams deferred.

The Post-Vatican II generation has inherited their realism. We have come of age in a time of near total disconnect between the Culture I hierarchy and Culture II laity and feel just as acutely what Paul Lakeland calls the "infantalization" of the most highly educated laity in the Church's history. Moreover, as Davidson's research indicates, we are a generation who stand in the middle of a gap in Catholic young adult and adult formation created by the vocation crisis. We also contend with the simultaneous rise of lay movements such as Voice of the Faithful, Christian Life Communities, Focolare, and Sant E'gidio as well as the mass exodus of our peers from the pews given that nearly a third of Americans raised as Catholics have left the Church.[15] As a result, to some extent ours is an autobiographical theology that attempts to narrate precisely what it means to be a Catholic in today's church as well as the theological meaning of the vocational ministries of the laity (including the lay theologian), something which Vatican II did not necessarily unpack. Moreover, those of us coming of age in the Post-Vatican II generation feel a responsibility to the Church to collaborate with these lay movements, to fill in the pastoral gaps, and to expend our theological energies and expertise outside of the academy whether through publishing for non-academic Catholic audiences, working in parish councils, serving as theological consultants, and joining lay associations and other intentional communities.

These are just of the few of the characteristics that arise out of the different formational fires across the generations in our profession. I contend that we will need to take them seriously if we want an honest and critical intergenerational dialogue in the academy about the issues we face in our church, universities, classrooms, and ministries.

STOKING THE MILLENNIAL FIRE OF FAITH

Davidson's research suggests that authentic engagement with the more than 686,000 millennial students we encounter in the 215 Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S. is perhaps the greatest service we can give the Church.[16] Scholars such as Davidson and others who study trends in religion among adolescents contend that the 12 million teenage Catholics in this country are the most underserved population in an already pastorally challenged Catholic

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[15]Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "A Portrait of American Catholics on the Eve of Pope Benedict's Visit to the U.S."

[16]As reported by the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities ⟨http://www.accunet.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageID = 3513⟩.

Church.[17] These youngest members of our Church have challenging cultural terrain to traverse. For example, perhaps more so than previous generations, the Millennials find themselves at the juncture of three roads with seemingly limited potential for merging: the predominately Culture II way of the laity, the Culture I path of the ecclesial hierarchy, and what Charles Taylor recently called the "cross-pressured" route that most contemporary persons in our "secular age" traverse. By this Taylor means our undeniable desire to experience "fullness" and our simultaneous suspicion that religious belief is either the best or worst way to do so.[18]

With these characteristics in mind, the theological classroom remains one of the only places where Millennial students can be empowered to explore the content and practices of Christian faith that have arisen from the human desire for fullness throughout history. Here they can encounter the rich contexts and beguiling contradictions of the Catholic tradition, continue to "think for themselves" (a hallmark of their generation) and yet also think about their responsibility to others, and discover alternatives to the various characteristics of what Christian Smith defines as the "moral therapeutic deism" that shapes so much of Millennial religious sensibilities. By this Smith means notions that "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other" and that "the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself."[19] Moreover, the theology classroom becomes a place to navigate critically what Taylor calls the "closed world systems" of religious belief and secularism. In other words, in the classroom we can explore the Millennials' drive to reject religious belief as unsophisticated and their simultaneous desire to participate in collective experiences that are larger than their individual selves, or engage their contradictory sense that religion is either a "threat, danger or distraction to the greatest good or something which satisfies our deepest craving for that good."[20]

Davidson's analysis, therefore, suggests three practical steps when it comes to stoking the fires of Millennial faith. First, his research underscores the importance of pedagogical excellence as the marker of a good Catholic theologian and an art that unites all generations in the academy. Strong teaching is usually publicly prized by most if not all theology departments but its real value is often unknown to those not yet privy to tenure and promotion deliberations. Charac-

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[17]For example, see Dean Hoge, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in a Culture of Choice* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001); Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and "Catholic Teenagers: Faith at Risk?" forum sponsored by Fordham University's Center for Religion and Culture, November 2, 2006, transcript available at ⟨http://www.fordham.edu/images/undergraduate/centeronreligionculture/nov%2002_transcript.pdf⟩.

[18]Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (New York: Belknap Press, 2007).

[19]Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162-163.

[20]Taylor, 548-49.

teristics of pedagogical excellence in light of Davidson's research include a collective commitment moving beyond defensive postures towards secularism, scientific materialism, and even the Culture I and I types of Catholicism; critically engaging cultural and generational pluralism; and implementing service-learning as pedagogically effective in integrating the content and practices of the beliefs which hold the generations together. Second, a shared commitment to pedagogical excellence encourages theologians to build bridges between the often disparate fields of theology and religious education/or pastoral ministry. If we want to influence students beyond the classroom, or affect the majority of young Catholics who are enrolled at non-Catholic institutions, we would do well to be in constructive dialogue and theological collaboration with the pastoral ministers who will form them in youth groups, Newman Centers, service-immersion trips, and liturgies. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Davidson's remarks regarding the Millennial experience suggest the need for an increased awareness on our part that, precisely as theologians and people of faith, we are role models who can demonstrate to our students ways of constructively engaging contradiction, pluralism, and difference within the Catholic tradition, within our Church, and within our global society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Davidson has given us much to consider regarding the significance of generational differences in terms of our self-understanding as Catholics. I suggest he also invites us to think inter-generationally about these differences in terms of our self-understandings as Catholic theologians. This conversation has been happening on the sidelines in our respective departments, our academy, and our Church. A commitment to engaging intergenerational pluralism will only enrich our collective commitment to doing rigorous and relevant theology. I thank Davidson for helping us to move this conversation to the center of theological discourse.

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