

Culture's Catechumens and the Church's Task

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Prolegomena

How may the Catholic faith be handed on in the early years of the third millennium in the USA? That is the general topic of this volume. It is a large and troubling question, for the church is, now as always, only a generation away from the extinction guaranteed by failure to pass on the faith with which she has been entrusted; and now, as always, there seems to the pessimistically and apocalyptically inclined (like me) little evidence that the church has the resources or the will to manage this difficult task. We have God's promise, however, of the continued guidance and blessing of the Holy Spirit, which is good, for we're going to need it.

Thought about handing on the faith requires thought about the cultural context within which this occurs. If it seems that the ambient culture is benevolent and hospitable, then it's likely that a correlationist model, according to which the church should discern what is good in the culture and cut its catechesis and proclamation according to that cloth, will seem attractive. This is not a view of the current relations between church and culture I hold. Quite the contrary: so far as I can tell, the ambient public culture of the US is profoundly pagan in the sense that it has been formed either in ignorance of or in opposition to the self-revelation of the God of Abraham. Furthermore,

the political order of the US is now, largely because of the pagan nature of its ambient culture, increasingly difficult to distinguish from a tyranny, by which I mean a political order whose public law in significant measure directly and explicitly contravenes the natural law and whose foreign policy has unjustly bathed all Americans in innocent blood. The public culture of the US is, therefore, inhospitable to both the practice and the transmission of the Catholic faith. If this is right (and of course it's disputable, although not, I think, reasonably so), the primary question is not how to correlate, harmonize, and accommodate but how to resist.

My task is to address context, and this I'll do by making some comments upon the cultural catechesis undergone by the members of what's come to be called "Generation Y" (roughly, those born between 1978 and 1991) in the USA—Catholic and otherwise. This generation includes most of today's high-school and college students and a few of its graduate students, professionals-in-training, and young adults already embarked upon working for a living. Relatively few of its members are yet married or deeply enmeshed in child-bearing and raising; almost none yet occupy positions of leadership in church or world; none, until the events of the last few years, has lived through a war or a serious economic depression—though many are nonetheless poor, and the poor among them are disproportionately represented by those now in military service; many are recent immigrants or the children of such; few of them can recall the presidency of Ronald Reagan, and some can't recall Bill Clinton; and most of them learn more happily and easily from visual and aural artifacts than from written ones. The events of 11 September 2001 will, for most of them, be the first event of major international significance to have made a lasting impression.

My expertise on the formation of this generation is limited: I've undertaken no quantitative studies and have no training in sociology, economics, or cultural theory. What I know or am willing to speculate about the matter is drawn from recent experience (2000-2005) teaching this generation at a large multi-ethnic and multi-religious state university in the American midwest, and from the fact that my own children belong to this generation (I have a daughter born in 1983, a recent graduate from a state university on the West coast and now in service in the Peace Corps in West Africa; and a son born in 1986, now an undergraduate at a Catholic university in Chicago).

The catechumenate of culture

Culture educates desire. Desire without culture's pedagogy is intense but inchoate, unformed, without goal or purpose: the newborn sucks as the nipple touches its lips; it startles, rigid and staring, if support is removed from its body and it feels itself suspended over the void; its eyes move to the light, irresistibly drawn. But without culture's pedagogy that's about as far as it goes: everything else is taught and learned: the gurgle and the scream become words; the boundary between the body and the world gradually becomes sharp and clear; the moving shapes—like trees walking—resolve themselves slowly into the mother, the father, the siblings, the friends. A world is learned as the house of language is entered and its taxonomies (this is a dog, that is a sunset, here you fall to your knees, there you curse, this is disgusting, that is beautiful) spin the child's cognitive and affective web with threads so strong that they seem given rather than made, natural rather than a matter of technique and artifice. Culture thus brings, experientially, the very order of things into being and shapes the individual's desires to harmonize with

that order. This is how it must be: it is the inevitability of the order of knowing here below.

Culture's catechumens submit willingly, eagerly, inevitably to this pedagogy. There is nothing else they—we—can do. Without such submission, such urgent embrace of language as culture's principal gift, we remain not only mute and inglorious but also not fully human. The extent to which we are human is the extent to which our desires—for thought, for making, for sex, for love, for beauty, for reputation, for pleasure, for God—have been educated and, thereby, formed. And, the precise shape of my particular humanity (and yours), what makes it possible for someone to treat me as this particular person and not some other, is given by the idiosyncratic burden of my catechized desires and the history by which they have assumed their specific gravity. I, for example, desire books, pictures, poetry, wines from southern Italy (that rough savor), women, well-turned English sentences, Handel's keyboard music at the hands of Keith Jarrett, Arvo Pärt's ecstatic musical minimalism, the Agnus Dei chanted slowly as prelude to the gift of flesh and blood, the cleansing rush of the words of absolution in the confessional, the litany of the saints, the rapid equatorial sunset, and above all else God, the *summa essentia* (*una quaedam summa res*,¹ says Augustine, carefully) whose gift made me and whose lineaments I now see enigmatically, *per speculum*, but will soon see, I hope, with all possible clarity. This particular burden of desire has extended catechesis as its necessary condition. The same is true for the desires of us all.

But the catechumenate of culture is, since the fall, not benign. Prospero's gift of language to Caliban brought with it the capacity and the desire to curse; learning the arts of making with tools brings with it always an increase in the capacity to kill and,

therefore, in the number of those killed by violence—since Abel, the earth has soaked up so much innocent blood that no step can now be taken without the foot's impress causing the blood to bubble redly from the soil; the *libido dominandi*, the chief mark of culture's deforming pedagogy, is everywhere, intertwined with the fleshly concupiscence of sensual desire wrongly educated and the ocular concupiscence of intellectual desire disordered.² We live now as people outside Eden have always lived, which is as eager catechumens of a culture that trains us carefully, with exquisite refinement and precision, to kill, to rape, to torture, to dominate, to control—and, above all, to obscure from ourselves that this is what we are doing. There has been, since the cherubim's flaming sword barred the way back into the garden, no golden age when this was not so, no time of simplicity and peace to which we should look back with nostalgia and longing. It's a characteristic error of conservatives (ecclesiastical and political), to think that there was, that the story we should tell is one of declension; the equal and opposite error of liberals is to think that the right story is one of progress, ever upward from the night of savagery into the day of democracy's civil society. In fact, culture's catechumenate has always been largely malign; the task of diagnosis is not to show how much better or worse things are now than once they were, but instead carefully to attend to the particulars of contemporary malignities. That always gives us quite enough to do.

The church is also a culture and so has its own pedagogy of desire. This pedagogy begins with death: the drowning of the old Adam and the old Eve in the baptismal bath, the renunciation of the blandishments of the world, the flesh, and the Devil (which is shorthand for pagan culture's pedagogy in all its complexity), the over-writing of all natural identities—gender, ethnicity, nationality, and so forth—by Christ's script, the

script of the cross.³ These old identities remain, of course, as a palimpsest; but for the Christian they are no longer determinative or exhaustive: they have been overwritten. We are Christians first and everything else (American, male, female, old, young, gay, straight) a very long way second. What we were remains only as ornament upon Christ's body. Grace perfects nature without destroying it, certainly. But the perfection granted is sufficiently scarifying that the nature perfected is to the nature fallen as the praise-shout of the angelic choir is to the beehive's drone.

All this means that the church is not only a culture with its own pedagogy, but also and necessarily a counter-culture with a counter-pedagogy. What the church under the Holy Spirit's guidance teaches its catechumens to desire assumes that the weight and pattern of their already-formed desires needs to be transfigured, at least, and often simply killed. The city of God has always its other, the human city; and the loves that inform the first are scarcely recognizable to those weighted with the loves characteristic of the second. And so the church must always strive to keep the catechumenate of culture closely in view. This is not because the church seeks to accommodate itself to that world; it is because the church seeks to transfigure it by drawing it into itself, baptizing what is good and consigning to the fire what is not. This is the proper meaning of inculturation. It cannot, however, be done without close attention to the particulars of the pedagogy of the pagan culture (it is always more or less pagan) in which the church finds herself. If the church's catechists do not know these particulars they fumble in the dark: what has already been written needs to be known if it is effectively to be over-written, and this is not as easy as it seems because culture's catechesis is, now as always, in flux, changing rapidly, difficult to pin down and understand.

Aural buzz and visual flood: the sensory ambience of contemporary culture

Generation Y lives and moves and has its being in an artificial sensorium of vast, stimulating power. Silence is rare: public space is almost always saturated with background music; moments without conversation, one's own or someone else's, have become ever rarer since the deep penetration of the cellphone into public life (most of Generation Y does not recall a world without this device); and when neither background music nor conversation are easily available, the personal music of the Discman or the I-pod will at once be resorted to. Silence is not sought and not much liked when found.

An illustration: If I arrive for class five minutes early, those already in the room will be doing one or several of the following: sleeping; reading in preparation for my class or some other; listening to music via earphones; talking on a cellphone; or chatting to someone sitting nearby. If reading is being done, it's almost always together with the cellphone or the music. Sleeping, in fact, is the only one among the activities I've mentioned that usually excludes the others—though I have seen instances of students apparently asleep with music still playing through their earphones. Often, then, the room will appear to contain a collection of largely isolated individuals, each being intensely and idiosyncratically stimulated through the ears, and each combining this with at least one other task.

Visual stimuli of a man-made and deliberately stimulating sort are almost as omnipresent. Most come through a screen: every dorm has large-screen TV lounges as important elements of its public space; every dorm room has multiple screens—often two computers and at least one TV for a small room shared between two people. A typical dorm room of perhaps 150 square feet will often include, during evening social hours:

half-a-dozen people; a movie playing on a DVD player; two or three cellphone conversations; music being downloaded and played, moderately loudly, through a computer hooked to a high-speed web connection, together with visual display on the computer's screen; and, of course, several different face-to-face conversations.

Some of the circles of Dante's hell would be preferable. But many members of Generation Y swim in this visual and aural environment like fish in a warm, salt sea. For the most part they have done so since childhood.

There are many things that could be and have been said about this aural buzz and visual flood. Often, the tone of such sayings is one of lament, like Plato's about the invention of writing. I've no intention of adding to those laments, and I note these facts about the Generation Y sensorium not to criticize them but only to register them, together with their likely causal connection to an indubitable set of facts about how Generation Y learns and studies, for these facts are, or should be, of great interest to the church's catechists and liturgists.

Generation Y's members, as this sketch of their environment suggests, are not creatures of the written word. They are, instead, creatures of the image and the sound, and of visceral response to both. Few of them have the ability or the desire to read or listen with attention to subtlety and nuance; fewer still have the patience for lengthy, complex argument. Faced with prose from Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Henry James, Don DeLillo, or even Dave Eggers, they will pass their eyes over the sentences and will for the most part construe them accurately; but they will have little idea of the shape of a lengthy passage's argument as a whole, and will as often as not be unable to say, having read, what the author has argued. Text-fragments (sentences, paragraphs) dance before

them as discrete entities. Weaving them together into a whole, keeping one fragment in mind as key to the meaning of another many pages later—these are not skills widely possessed by the generation, nor actively sought and valued by its members. I often teach, for example, Augustine's *Confessions* (mostly in Henry Chadwick's translation). At least three-quarters of an average class finds it impossible without very extensive guidance to read a book of the *Confessions* and offer a written summary of its content. This is not because they can't read the sentences; it's because they can't keep the beginning in mind long enough to see its relevance to the end, and because they find Augustine's rhetoric a dazzling bafflement.

By contrast, image and sound are familiar and loved. Response to them appears effortless, and does not generate resistance and tension. This is in part because image and sound are consumed recreationally, while the written word is not. Probably less than 10% of Generation Y reads for pleasure—and I mean reads anything at all. This is certainly true of my students. But more than 90% (probably almost all) consumes images and music recreationally, and has done so since early childhood⁴

These claims are not a lament. I mean them only descriptively. The church, certainly, has (or should have) no particular stake in encouraging literacy: the vast majority of Catholics have always been illiterate, and this is not a problem. It may even make the practice of Christianity easier. But the facts mentioned in the two preceding paragraphs (if they are facts) do raise some questions for the church's catechetical practice.

The first such question has to do with comprehension of and response to the spoken (rather than the written) word. In this, I believe, the church does have an

important stake. Proclamation requires that the Gospel's word be spoken and understood; the liturgy makes proclamation of the scriptural word of quite central import. But I do not think that most of Generation Y's desires, formed as they have been by a culture in which the paradigm for oral communication is the fifteen-word sentence (active voice, indicative mood, no sub-clauses), give them the capacity to understand St. Paul or St. John read from the ambo. The words flow over and around them as ambient vibration. (It must also be said that the way in which Scripture is read aloud in most Catholic churches does not help: we read as though we have no expectation that what we read will or should be comprehended; we certainly provide little or no silence in which we might think about it.) I have no immediate recommendation to make about this, other than to note that the ability to comprehend complex prose by ear is articulated in complex ways with the capacity to recall what one has heard. And this capacity has received almost no training by the culture's pedagogy, and is effectively not practiced by the church—not many in Generation Y can easily and without book recite the Gloria, the Credo, the Sanctus, and the Agnus Dei (and I don't mean in Latin). Our churchly catechesis has lost sight of the importance of memory, and this is both mistaken and quite unnecessary. As we make the transition from a culture in which book-literacy is valued and aspired to to one in which it is not, we need badly to recover the techniques developed for other times and places in which such literacy was largely absent; and so far as I can tell, we are not doing so.

The second such question has to do with the increasing (as it appears to me) removal of visual pedagogy from our churches. If Generation Y is not a generation of the word but of the image and the (musical) sound, then this would seem a strong reason to increase—to maximize, even—the presence of icons in our churches. I use the term

"icon" in a relaxed sense to include statues, stained glass, frescoes, paintings, and so on: the more of this the better, so far as Generation Y is concerned. And yet, church buildings designed and constructed since 1970 in the US have moved in the opposite direction, stripping away visual stimuli and visual complexity. This makes little sense. The pre-verbal child in church is instructed in complex ways by abstractedly gazing at stained-glass images of the saints, plaster statues of the Virgin, bloody images of Christ on the cross, and so on. So would be the members of Generation Y, but too often we deny them the chance.

Pagan pedagogy of identity: the brand⁵

A company called QuotableMugs markets an expensive (\$10.95-\$12.95) line of coffee mugs branded with inspirational slogans. One of these is: 'Life isn't about finding yourself. It's about creating yourself.' The distinction between invention and discovery has of course a long and interesting intellectual history. This slogan, although not subtle, appears to affirm the significance of that history and of the difference between invention and discovery by promoting the former over the latter. But the very same company also markets a mug that reads "be who you are," which promotes discovery over invention. The purposes of QuotableMugs, it seems fair to assume, are entirely commercial: what they think will sell is what they make and market. Intellectual consistency is not the point. But these two mugs, and the company that makes them, may nonetheless serve as emblematic of some important facts about the pagan catechesis of identity: that this catechesis is fundamentally and essentially interested in identity; that it wants to mark that identity by branding; and that it is equally at home with tropes of discovery and

tropes of invention in undertaking the branding process. This has deep effects, I think, upon Generation Y's sense of itself.

The fundamental desire of the members of that generation is to be thoroughly branded.⁶ It is to this end that almost all the energies of culture's catechesis are bent, and to this end that the burden of educated desire tends. The brand is the mark of identity: cattle have it burned into their hides; consumer goods are branded to make it possible for buyers to remember and identify with them; and the brand is an essential element of corporate culture, that by which corporations identify themselves to the public and maintain and manipulate their public profile. The brand, then, is both a public fact and a communal fact: it marks those branded as human beings of a certain sort, but also, and at the same time, as members of a community of those of like sort. There is a Christian version of the brand, of course: in baptism we are marked as Christ's own forever and thereby incorporated into the community of those also so marked. It is likely (as is usual) that corporate and commercial understandings of the brand are debased derivatives of this Christian usage (and the Christian usage is in turn an appropriation and re-making of the Jewish brand of circumcision).

The members of Generation Y have been taught by entertainers, advertisers, and educators (the difference between the latter two is increasingly hard to discern as commercial culture makes inroads into our public schools) that branding itself is important, indeed that it is the only thing of real importance, and that all their desires should be bent toward it because from it all else flows. But, as QuotableMugs have already shown us, the tropes and images used to send this message are various and not entirely coherent. I'll try to disentangle them.

The first set of tropes embroiders upon the ideas of making and cultivation. This is the point of the first of my QuotableMug slogans. Grade-school teachers often tell their charges that they can be anything they want to be, that they are limited only by their imaginations. The US Army tells its potential recruits the same thing. The claim is of course outrageously false, though no doubt well-enough intentioned: the truth is that each of us is finite, limited, damaged, and constrained by very many factors, and this means exactly that we cannot be anything we wish to be. It is a mark of adult and reasonable humanity to acknowledge this, and it is a catechetical malformation of our young people to tell them otherwise. Nonetheless, this is what they are repeatedly told, and they have, to a considerable extent, internalized it. The message is that what they've been given (their ethnicity, their social class, their sex, their physical appearance, their tastes) can be remade. Where you end need not be where you began: plasticity has no limits, and the given can always be resisted or jettisoned by energetic cultivation of something different.⁷

The remakings can be mild. Perhaps you're a Vespa-riding vegetarian Goth with multiple body-piercings: you can jettison that and become a White-Sox-loving beerswiller who drives a pickup truck without too much trouble (the piercings will heal gradually). Or, perhaps you're a straight oenophile with Republican leanings: it's not too hard to become a gay vodka-drinker who votes for Ralph Nader. Or, perhaps you're a Polish Catholic with a taste for kielbasa: a few short steps, a little study, the cultivation of some new religious and culinary tastes and voilà, you're a Conservative kosher-keeping Jew whose only connection to things Polish is excoriation of that ethnic group's traditional anti-semitism (this remaking may involve cutting your family ties, but that too

is always possible). Or, perhaps you're an academically under-achieving bodybuilder with a record of making bad movies: as we've seen, you can remake yourself into the governor of the wealthiest state in the union. But the remakings can also be drastic, involving surgery, transplants, drugs, and genetic manipulation. Perhaps you're a woman: you can become a man. Perhaps you're five feet three and two hundred pounds: liposuction and shin implants can do wonders. Perhaps you have small breasts or a small penis: either can be made larger. Perhaps you're no longer interested in sex: drugs can change that. Perhaps, until now, your children have been ugly or stupid or crippled; manipulation of the genome may soon be able to give you only Harvard-bound world-class athletes.⁸ And so on.

Holding up the shining image of becoming anything you want to be educates desire to seek to transform the given by the cultivation of taste. Such an education creates a burden that weighs heavily upon the members of Generation Y. I mean the burden of an excess of possibility, too many glittering images of what one might become. Am I to be a gay Latina or must I remain a straight Hispanic? Do I need surgery to transform my body? True, I'm now an Asian biker chick, but I could be a Jigger (full explanation of these interesting niche-identities would divert us too far from the matter at hand). Should I try on the rôle of an aspiring banker (poring over the Financial Times as I drink my latte), or is the retro campus Maoist (clutching the Chairman's little red book) more my style? Our culture's script provides so many rôles, so many kinds of possible identity. They multiply as fast as cold remedies, cereal varieties, and weight-loss products on the supermarket shelves, and each is given its means of public visibility, representation, and support: its 'zines, its sartorial style, its food, its chat-rooms, its logo-bearing credit card,

and its argot by which its aficionados recognize one another as Freemasons used to know one another by the secret handshake. All this, to Generation Y, is both dazzling and oppressive: so many possibilities and so many difficulties in deciding which to embrace. As I freeze before the excess of possibility represented by the supermarket's cereal shelves, so many of them freeze before the excess of possibility represented by market-driven human plasticity.

But the pedagogy of the brand is not exhausted by considering tropes of making and plastic possibility. These are intertwined with another set of tropes of a broadly essentialist sort. These tropes have to do with discovery, with finding the glassy, jewel-like essence that defines your true identity. This explains the second of my QuotableMugs slogans. Practitioners of this second way of talking share with those who prefer the first way (they are, naturally, usually the same people) an interest in providing those whose desires they're educating a means of resisting the given. But now such resistance is grounded not upon an appeal to imagination and the plasticity of body, mind, and soul; it is grounded instead upon an appeal to a genuine identity that makes the one who has it essentially different from what she seems to be. The effort of resisting the given is now grounded upon the discovery of the true self. So, for example, I hear students say, 'I was fourteen when I realized I was gay,' or, 'I knew that I was an artist when I first picked up a pencil.' Another form of this rhetoric, much more common at the level of the educational establishment, is talk of discovering oneself as African-American or Latino. This talk assumes (and communicates) that there really are ethnic, racial, and gender identities of this sort, and that they can be discovered rather than made. It's interesting to note that transformations as radical as any envisaged by the advocates of

imagination can be grounded upon this essentialist rhetoric. It's become a commonplace of the sex-change memoir that the woman-who-was-once-a-man knew from a very early age that her masculinity was not who she really was, and that such a realization was why she altered her body.

The same trope is equally common in matters of sexual preference and practice: people will say that they discover their gayness or straightness, as if it were a property indistinguishable from their height or their eye-color (both, of course, now changeable, at least in theory).

The pedagogy of the brand is, then, rhetorically quite complicated and almost certainly incoherent. Who propounds this rhetoric? Who forms desire in this way? The answer is, of course, almost everyone: Generation Y talks to itself in these terms because it has learned them so well, which means that the peer group reinforces the pedagogy of desire already received. There is constant reinforcement from mass-media entertainment (television, internet, movies), as there also is from the educational industry and the forces of the market. I can't explore all these pedagogical forces here, but I will say a few words about the latter two.

The educational industry begins the pedagogy of the brand very young. Even before students can read, they are encouraged to look at pictures that reflect their sex and ethnicity, to identify with the people so represented, and to draw sustenance from that identification. A little later, a similar tack will be taken with representation of families: the child will be encouraged to perceive and identify with representations of his or her own family structure (one-parent, two-parent, same-sex, opposite-sex). And then there is the offering by the schools of festivals and feasts in celebration of particular ethnicities,

particular gender-identities, particular sexual tastes and practices, and so on. By the time students arrive at higher education (those who make it that far) they find a proliferation of new (meaning post-1980, for the most part) programs of study that also offer a pedagogy of the brand: Catholic Studies, Jewish Studies, Native American Studies, African-American Studies, Latino and Latin-American Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and so on. None of these programs closes its courses to those not of the relevant persuasion; but all tend to speak more to those who are or plan to be of that persuasion than to those who aren't and have no interest in being. Some proselytise overtly and strenuously. (I underscore that Catholic Studies belongs in this list, a matter to which I'll return.) Such brand-specific programs contribute to the pervasive sense that the brand is indeed what counts, even though this is never the professed purpose of such programs. And such an impression is only reinforced by the necessity that all secular universities (and to an increasing extent religiously-affiliated ones as well) find themselves under pressure to provide extra-curricular nurture and support to students who've already branded themselves. And so we find such things as offices for gay, lesbian, and transgendered students; university contribution to the pastoral presence of particular churches; and the formation of ethnic- or nation-specific student associations, usually also with active university support.

Much more important in branding than the pedagogy of the educational establishment, however, is the pedagogy of the market. Capitalism—the market economy—has moved on from its early phase, which was constituted by the discovery of mass production, the concentration of population in cities, and the fostering of mass markets for standardized products (the Model T is the paradigm of this phase). It has

become, now, what's often called "late capitalism," and in that form the increasing segmentation of markets is essential to the stimulus of desire.⁹ Success in marketing means the creation, *de novo*, of a new niche, to which all the markers of identity can be sold. This is the very hallmark of late capitalism, and so all the considerable forces of the advertising industry are brought to bear upon the nurturing of the kinds of identities mentioned above. The nurture in question involves, of course, the feeding with product of those captured by the catechesis of the brand. The pedagogy of the market is powerful because it is omnipresent: the vocabulary and patterns of thought that it provides are dominant for Generation Y. Desire runs in these channels, strong and deep.

The apparent contradiction between the two QuotableMugs slogans with which I began this section is resolved by the deeper grammar of market segmentation and the identity-construction that goes with it. The trope of discovery and the trope of invention are both devices in the service of branding. Generation Y's members, then, are encouraged to know who they are, and they will indiscriminately use both tropes. What they are doing is responding to a bastardized, late-capitalist deformation of the Apollonian injunction. To know oneself according to this pagan model is to brand oneself: to mark oneself as a particular kind of human being (the brand as trademark), and also as a creature of a particular community (the brand as mark of ownership).

The omnipresence of the Lockean church

So far, then, we have Generation Y floating in an aural and visual flood, catechized by the late-capitalist market into seeking and finding its identities in increasingly segmented communities of taste whose existence is justified by tropes of quasi-genetic identity. Such communities are Lockean churches. John Locke, in the 1685 *Letter Concerning*

Toleration, defined a church as "a voluntary society of men, joining themselves together of their own accord in order to the public worshipping of God, in such a manner as they judge acceptable to him, and effectual to the saving of their souls."¹⁰ This is a community of taste and choice, constructed by a particular catechesis of desire. It is in all important structural respects like the community of those who mourn the passing of Phish (a latter-day Grateful Dead), those who read *qvMagazine* (a 'zine for gay Latinos), or those who like to go to monster-truck demolition derbies. The world of late-capitalism has made all communities seem to those who inhabit them to be of this sort. The use of tropes of discovery to explain and justify membership in these communities ("I read *qvMagazine* because I really am a gay Latino") is, now, only a device to cement habits of consumption.

If this diagnosis is right, it follows at once that Generation Y Catholics will understand their Catholicism in this way. They have been catechized by their culture to understand all identities in this way, and there is no reason to think that Catholic identity will be exempt. The proliferation of cultural studies programs at universities, mentioned above, fits perfectly into this profile: Catholic Studies is there in just the same way and for just the same reasons that (e.g.) African-American Studies or Asian-American Studies is there—which is to say as the intellectual arm of a Lockean church.

But what does it mean to understand the Catholic Church as a Lockean church, and why is this a problem (if it is) for the Catholic Church's handing on of its tradition? The central point, I think, is that inhabitants of Lockean churches will typically understand their community and their membership in it by subsuming the order of being into the order of knowing. They will be aware, inchoately, that they have come to be

Catholic (or gay or straight or Republican) by means of a catechesis of desire; they will be aware, too, that this could have been otherwise—that if local variables had been different their desires would have been formed differently and the Lockean churches in which they would then have found themselves would be different from the ones in which they now find themselves. These are claims in the order of knowing: they say something about how habit and identity are formed, including the habits of assent required by membership in any Lockean church. But they are not yet claims in the order of being: those are claims about what a particular Lockean church actually is. For late-capitalist Lockeans, however, claims in the order of being are not separate from those in the order of knowing. If membership in a community requires a catechesis of desire; if, too, that catechesis is contingent (it could have been otherwise) and not coerced, then it follows at once that the community in question just is a community of taste, preference, and predilection. It makes no sense from a late-capitalist-Lockean perspective to identify a community so joined as a community of truth, to say of it that it in fact is the community that preserves and transmits more fully than any other the truth about human beings and the world in which we live.

And because the cultural catechesis undergone by Generation Y does not permit such claims—makes them seem irretrievably and puzzlingly odd—the members of that generation will inevitably (for the most part) not understand their Catholicism in terms of them. They will find it difficult to understand that anyone can seriously make such claims, for they will construe all claims about a community's nature—about what it is—by reference to the paradigm I've already discussed. An example: I often teach selections from Aquinas' questions on virtue in the *Summa*. Some students will make a serious

attempt to understand what he's arguing, and some will succeed. But almost always, and often with the force of a puzzled epiphany, there will be a moment in class when some (usually a brighter) student will raise her hand and say (something like): 'But doesn't that mean he thinks that everyone should think like he does about these virtues?' Well, yes, it does: he thinks it's the truth. But to most members of Generation Y that is an extraordinarily odd thing to think. For them, the community of Aristotelian-Thomist virtue theorists (they wouldn't put it like that, of course) is one that might reasonably have its slogan-branded sweatshirts, and its own credit cards whose every transaction yields a small donation to Peter's Pence (they'd have an image of the Dumb Ox and the slogan *virtus animam facit optimam* in the top-right-hand corner). But they can't think of it as one that it makes sense to say teaches the truth, *simpliciter*. This reaction is neither coherent nor (usually) thought through: it is just what someone formed by the catechesis of a late-capitalist culture is almost inevitably going to say and think. The grammar of the culture does not permit the Catholic Church's view of itself the dignity of being a well-formed utterance. Teaching that view is therefore difficult, and provides what I take to be the deepest level of challenge for the church's transmission of itself in the USA in the first centuries of the third millennium.

But I should end on a hopeful note: *Oculus non vidit, nec auris audivit, nec in cor hominis ascendit, quae praeparavit Deus his, qui diligunt illum.*

ENDNOTES

1. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 1.55. Compare Augustine, *In epistulam Ioannis*, 7.10.
2. The scriptural basis for this typology of malformed desire is 1 John 2:16. For an interesting—indeed, riveting—analysis of the three kinds of malformed desire, see Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10, which is largely structured around them.
3. I discuss this theme of overwriting and erasure in "Christians and the Church," forthcoming in Gil Meilaender and Bill Werpehowski, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
4. On the transition from a literate to a pre-literate culture and its meaning see, e.g., Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Barry Sanders, *A is for Ox: Violence, Electronic Media, and the Silencing of the Written Word* (New York: Pantheon, 1994); Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Culture* (Winchester, Massachusetts: Faber & Faber, 1994); idem, *My Sky Blue Trades: Growing Up Counter in a Contrary Time* (New York: Viking, 2002).
5. On late capitalism's fundamental logic see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). On

late capitalism's effects upon identity-formation, see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). (Frank is also editor of the Chicago magazine *The Baffler*, much of which is devoted to this theme.) And on late capitalism and identitarianism, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

6. On branding and Generation Y see Alissa Quant, *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

7. The distinctively American form of this drive for remaking has recently (and too sympathetically) been depicted by David Brooks in *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). But it is no new theme in descriptions of America, surfacing as early as Tocqueville.

8. On consumerism, choice, and plasticity, see Terri Kapsalis, "Making Babies the American Girl® Way," *The Baffler* 15 (2002), 29-33. This essay is a classic of analytical anthropology and deserves to be much better known.

9. On the stimulus of desire, the niche market, and the (Lacanian) *objet petit a* see the many works of Slavoj Žižek, especially (with regard to the connections with Christianity), *The Fragile Absolute—Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting*

For? (London: Verso, 2000), and *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 2003).

10. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1685), in David Wootton, ed., *Political Writings of John Locke* (New York: Mentor, 1993), 396.