

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of
“Beyond Its Use-By Date? Pondering the Future of Faith”

presented on July 14, 2018 by
Reverend Richard Lennan

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Dr. Colleen Griffith: Good morning.

Participants: Good morning.

Dr. Griffith:

The work of the theologian is truly vocational. It is a calling, an invitation to contemplate the movement of grace, seeking deeper understanding of God and God's revelation in history. This vocation rises from within a community of faith, contributing to the life and mission of the Church and the world through its giving of expression to truths that unfold in mysteries of faith, mysteries that seek to be known and enacted, mysteries that touch human experience deeply, and shape historical agency. One who seeks truth in this way does so best by abiding in it, which is why life in the Spirit is the heart of the vocation of the theologian.

The 20th century spiritual giant, Evelyn Underhill, has lots to say about life in the Spirit. She identifies interior dispositions and habits to be cultivated that characterize it. Focused attention, singleness of heart, openness to patterns of contemplation, adoration of God as one's interior bearing, and cooperation with God's creative Spirit in the world.

Our speaker this morning approaches the theological task formed by these very dispositions and cultivated habits. His theological work, ever a service to the life and mission of the Christian community, is a testament to life lived in the Spirit. His scholarship, writing, teaching, and preaching inspire, challenge, and give reason for hope.

Richard Lennan, a priest of the diocese of Maitland-Newcastle since 1983, is professor of systematic theology in the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College. His principal fields of research and teaching are ecclesiology and the theology of ministry. He has particular interest in the theology and spirituality of Karl Rahner.

He holds a master of philosophy degree from the University of Oxford and a doctorate in theology from the University of Innsbruck. He is the author of two books, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* and *Risking the Church: The Challenge of Catholic Faith*. He's the editor of five others, most recently, *The Holy Spirit: Setting the World on Fire*, which he co-edited with Nancy Pineda-Madrid and published with Paulist Press in 2017.

Prior to moving to Boston, Richard taught theology for 15 years at the Catholic Institute of Sydney, and had wide involvement in ecumenical activities and pastoral planning in

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Australia and New Zealand. He is past president of the Australian Catholic Theological Association, and serves currently as an editorial consultant for theological studies.

Richard is a most respected scholar, teacher, a trusted leader, and an esteemed colleague in our school. He has served as chair of the Ecclesiastical Faculty and is presently coordinator of the Systematics area and director of the STL program.

Those of you who have encountered Richard firsthand, know of his concern for his students and colleagues alike, expressed in countless generous actions on their behalf. Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to welcome to this stage somebody that we celebrate regularly at the STM and do so especially today. Richard Lennan, addressing "The Future of Faith."

[APPLAUSE]

Rev. Richard Lennan: Good morning.

Participants: Good morning.

Fr. Lennan:

I am so delighted to be here. And for that, I particularly thank Melinda and the people with whom she works, for the invitation and for the care that they took in organizing all the details for this morning. I thank Jackie Regan and Marcia Ryan for organizing the alumni gathering earlier. And I'm most grateful to Colleen for that very gracious introduction. And thank you all for being here. I appreciate that. Giving up a sunny Saturday morning in the middle of summer is not done lightly, so it's wonderful that you're here.

Do you support the use of torture? This question featured in the recent confirmation hearing for the nominee to head the CIA. While the brutality of waterboarding would seem to leave no room for equivocation, the nominee was evasive. Sidestepping the demand for a yes or no answer, she would say only that "the CIA acted within the law."

While fruitless if measured by the light shed on the nominee's values, the exchange established at least one thing indisputably: direct questions do not always receive direct answers.

By now you may be ahead of me, wondering whether "Beyond Its Use-By Date?", itself a direct question, will receive a direct response. In fact, you may already be anticipating an hour of ducking and weaving along the lines of, well, look, it all depends on what you mean by "beyond"— [LAUGHTER] —by "use-by," and come to think of it, perhaps even "date" need some exegesis. That approach would be likely to send you home more than a little frustrated, while also validating the worst caricatures of theologians.

What follows here will include definitions and distinctions, but my hope is that they will clarify rather than obfuscate facilitating a response that is unambiguous, yet sufficiently nuanced to avoid being one-dimensional. That response, faithful to the subtitle of this presentation, results from "Pondering the Future of Faith."

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"Pondering," I'd want to underscore—and here's an instance of a distinction—differs from providing a recipe for and certainly from predicting, the latter being a charism to which theologians have no privileged access. There are four steps in this presentation.

First, to construct the scaffolding for my answer, I'll sketch a profile of both faith and theology with an emphasis on the interweaving of the two. Theology provides a key diagnostic instrument for understanding faith, for assessing the vigor of contemporary expressions of faith, and for considering the prospects of faith.

Since faith is a human activity, a designation that does not exclude God's role, it comes under scrutiny not only from theology, but from various human and social sciences. From history, from sociology and demography, and from cultural anthropology and social psychology, among other fields. The prominence of those disciplines in popular commentary on faith need not threaten theology's place in the discourse on the topic. In fact, since theology, too, is a human activity, also a claim that need not imply exclusion of God, it has a basis for dialogue with other human perspectives. Theology's perspective is particular without being idiosyncratic. If theology is to contribute to debates about the place of faith in a fully human life, it cannot isolate itself from other sources of insight into human experience.

Second task will be to identify why "the future of faith" is in question today, a topic that is often the primary focus of the human sciences that study faith. Since this topic is vast, I will concentrate on the factors most significant for the future of faith, either as challenges or as opportunities, categories that can be mutually inclusive rather than exclusive.

The third section will bring into relief the resources that a theology of faith provides for engaging with the circumstances of the contemporary context.

Fourth and finally, I'll answer the title's question, an answer that the earlier steps will shape. And so first, to a profile of faith in theology.

Drawing for the moment with broad strokes, we can say that theology belongs within a community of faith and seeks to illuminate what God enables for our world, for the physical world as well as for the human beings who populate it. Theologians do not devise their own god, but respond within a community and a tradition of faith. They respond to God's own Word and action, to what Christians name grace, or more fully, God's self-revelation.

This self-disclosure of God is not primarily for the sake of conveying information, whether as facts about God or as a code of behavior, but is an invitation. In the words of Vatican II's portrayal of God's revelation in Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God addresses humankind as friends and moves among them in order to invite and receive them into God's own company. God's self-communication intends a relationship with God's creation. Faith, no less than the theology that emerges from it, is the human and grace-formed response to God's initiative. This response never ceases to include our questions, our longings, and our myriad forms of complexity.

To elaborate on the implications that God's self-disclosure has for faith and theology, I can happily draw from two of my predecessors at this Underhill podium, Elizabeth Johnson and

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Rowan Williams. Since Johnson and Williams are academic theologians, they may be concerned that their analysis will be remote from the everyday life of faith.

Academic theology, however, is at its best when it has its roots in and complements the everyday life of faith. Both Johnson and Williams epitomize this ideal. They write as members of the community of faith, the church, as believers facing, along with the rest of us, the issues that gave birth to doubts about the sustainability of faith in our time.

Engagement with the questions addressed to the possibility of faith is not reserved to the academy, but is open to all who wonder about faith or desire to deepen it. To this shared enterprise, academic theology brings specific resources to support the community of faith as it takes up its current challenges.

These resources come from a reflection on the enduring wisdom embedded in the history of faith and from dialogue with the contemporary wisdom emerging from various strands of the humanities and sciences. Through these contributions, the work of theology can be a means by which the Holy Spirit enables the community of faith to navigate questions of the present with an eye to the future.

Underpinning faith and theology is the God who exceeds our grasp. Paradoxically, the revelation of God does not enable us to know God exhaustively, as if God were an object. Revelation, rather, makes plain the difference between God and us. It opens our eyes to the otherness of God. As Elizabeth Johnson expresses it, "Revelation enables us to recognize that the reality of the Living God is a mystery beyond all telling. The infinitely creating, redeeming, and indwelling Holy One is so far beyond the world and so deeply within the world as to be literally incomprehensible."

God, then, is not a mystery, such that God could be classified within a group. But God is Mystery, the one who eludes every containing category. Even the word God, then, is not one that defines and delineates. Indeed, Karl Rahner assesses that word to be almost ridiculously exhausting and demanding, as he confronts us with the reality that we will never control.

Authentic talk about God must avoid any reduction of the incomprehensible God to something more manageable, to an idol, malleable to our desires. While idol may conjure up images of golden calves and so appear to be oddly quaint against the backdrop of the digital age, the term captures an aspect of human behavior applicable to every era: namely, our tendency to confine God within the boundaries of our preferences. A God who is neither an idol nor the same as us is automatically a challenging God. But faith, as we shall see, can embrace that truth as a liberation rather than an affront.

Rowan Williams takes up what the reality of the incomprehensible God means for the life of faith, and especially for the work of theology. "Theology," he argues "will probe those aspects of religious practice which pull in the direction of ideological distortion, those things which presuppose that there is a perspective that leaves nothing out. It will also challenge the notion that these are the terms in which God is to be imagined."

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Since God always remains "Other" than us, our talk about God, no matter who we are or what our convictions, can never say the final word about God. Even less can any of us assert legitimately that we've said the only possible word about God.

Taken together, the ideas of Johnson and Williams suggest the need for humility in the work of theology. Humility born from accepting that our words cannot do justice to God. In this emphasis, both Johnson and Williams move along a rich vein in the history of Christian spirituality, one that accentuates the surrender, the centrality of surrender to the God who transcends us. I'll take up later in the lecture the appeal or otherwise, of surrender as a focus for the future of faith.

Respecting the imperative that we not make God less than God, differs from imposing silence on theologians and other believers. Christian faith is built on the conviction that God has spoken in our history, has become one with us in Jesus, and continues through the Holy Spirit to be with us. In Christ, Christians profess, God fulfills the promise made repeatedly to Israel: *I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be my people.*

God's self-communication enables us to speak truthfully about God. It also encourages us in our efforts to understand, express, and enact what the breadth and depth of God's desire for friendship enables for humanity and for the world. In addition to doing justice to God, therefore, the depictions of God through which we express our faith must do justice to all that God's grace makes possible for us.

Since God is, in Rahner's formulation, the liberating freedom of our freedom, we have as people of faith and as theologians, a capacity for creativity that flows from God's own creativity. We must not succumb, then, to passivity or resignation disguised as faith.

While the particulars of faith's future are unknowable, what is knowable—indeed, certain—is that God's Holy Spirit does not restrict us, but extends us. As Elizabeth Johnson observes, "If the rock you lean on is too minuscule to support the range of your life's desires, faith will collapse as you grow into maturity. For a community like the church, if the God they lean on is inadequate, they will lead a cramped religious life."

Accordingly, our theology must talk about faith in ways that express the God whom Jesus makes present: the God who desires for all people and for the whole of Creation that they may have life and have it abundantly.

In Williams, there is an echo of Johnson's emphasis on the fact that God's presence broadens rather than narrows our vision. Reflecting on the incarnation of Jesus in the fleshy reality of humanity, Williams writes, "The presence of God's Word, God's freedom to love and to communicate so permeates that piece of the human world which is Jesus of Nazareth that the fullest possible meanings of God are communicated there, and the very freedom of God is acted out in that life to make us free."

Although you and I cannot lay claim to being the incarnate word of God, the grace of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit dwells in us, making us God's temple. We ought to settle, then, for nothing less than what God makes possible.

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As a step towards providing the light and shade that will enable a fuller portrait of faith and its possibilities for the future, I'll move to the second part of this paper, which will review the contemporary context of faith.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, the issues influencing the state of faith in the present day are many and intricate. In addition, what applies in one part of the world might not be significant in others, so it would be more accurate to speak of multiple contemporary contexts of faith. Both of those factors have influenced how this section will develop. Rather than list individual issues, I'll analyze three sets of influences significant for the prospects of faith in today's world, sets that I'll gather under one overarching idea.

Although this material will reflect the prevailing situation in North America, it will have resonances in other settings as well. My approach will make everything far more neat and orderly than reality can ever be, but it enables an overview of all that the practice in theology of faith face today and perhaps tomorrow.

The thesis of this section is that the three sets of influences I'll discuss—the cultural, spiritual, and ecclesial—all illustrate that dislocation is the primary feature of the present moment of faith. Dislocation as the overarching experience of today is an idea I'm borrowing from *The Unmoored God*, the recently published book of the American Jesuit theologian Paul Crowley. Crowley's argument is that dislocation, which involves a sense of homelessness and loss of certainty, is as evident in matters of faith as it is in many other areas of contemporary life.

At first hearing, dislocation conveys a negative impression. But like many challenges, it contains the seeds of opportunity. In fact, dislocation is only irredeemable if we think that the way things used to be was as good as they ever could be. That fear, to repeat an idea from Elizabeth Johnson, is likely to reflect faith as a minuscule rock, even an idol, rather than what grows from trust in the expansiveness of the incomprehensible God.

Perhaps the best way to summarize cultural dislocation, the first influence, is to say that all that once seemed settled and certain about our world is now in flux. Various theories would locate the roots of this dislocation in the Reformation, the French Revolution, the First World War, the development of nuclear weapons, the emergence of the global economy, the proliferation of digital technology, or sundry other events, movements, or individuals.

Whatever its precise origins, cultural dislocation has shattered predictability and rendered opaque the contours of the future. Manifold forms of dislocation have shaken social and political systems in many parts of the world, prompting a variety of efforts to paper over cracks in order to preserve, as far as possible, the structures that once provided stability, albeit imperfectly.

Nonetheless, it is increasingly difficult to disguise or ignore cultural dislocation, the present-day impact of which is showcased tragically in the burgeoning number of refugees and migrants across the globe. Nor is cultural dislocation something that occurs only to other people. The fact that human action threatens the ecosystems of our planet illustrates its universal application.

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Cultural dislocation calls into question the world's business as usual. Sadly, but not surprisingly, one response to this dislocation is to find someone to blame for it. Accompanying blame is the attempt to return to all that was supposedly better before the disruptive forces had their way. Before illegal immigrants, before the decline of coal, and before the plan to provide universal health care. Such efforts at return, even when supported by those on the underside of the prior social structures, tend to benefit only people who profited from the earlier systems rather than forging a new and more fruitful way of living for everyone.

In the midst of this cultural dislocation, there is an alternative to the desire to recapture an allegedly Golden Age. This alternative is to imagine a future that differs from the past.

At present, we can see stirrings of more creative and constructive approaches in the Black Lives Matter and the Me Too Movements, movements that emphasize a changed future rather than a reclaimed past. Indeed, they critique the past rather than lament its loss. Similarly, the multiple and diverse efforts to respond to climate change by less wasteful forms of production and consumption exemplify a commitment to the future that recognizes the limits of the past.

It may seem that I've now wandered far from anything pertaining to the future of faith, but the dynamics of dislocation and blame are as evident in matters of faith as elsewhere. It is especially prominent in relation to ecclesial dislocation. The examples of creative responses to cultural dislocation are also relevant to considering the future of faith, raising, as they do, a question about the capacity of Christian faith to empower similar creativity.

Since culture has often been the vehicle in which faith could travel comfortably, cultural dislocation leads inexorably to spiritual dislocation. This is especially so when the cultural dislocation multiplies human suffering.

As the breadth and depth of human suffering multiplies through culturally dislocating forces, suffering has been and remains a principal obstacle to faith in a loving and benevolent God. Those challenges have been funneled in recent times through the critiques of faith that the new atheists have propounded. As Crowley asked, "Apropos of the absence of an answer that can comprehensively and concisely explain suffering and simultaneously acquit God of any blame or responsibility for it, why, indeed, believe if life seems to offer no more than a trial of endurance?"

Beyond the impact of suffering, the most high-profile expression of spiritual dislocation comes in the form of the "nones," those who profess no religious affiliation. This category includes in its component parts the spiritual but not religious and those who subscribe to believing but not belonging. The number of those who regard traditional religious forms and even the whole idea of God as irrelevant to their lives is on a rising trajectory, an increase in which people baptized as Catholics also figure.

Accompanying this phenomenon are expressions of disaffiliation and de-conversion, terms that convey not a casual drifting away from religious practice, but the explicit choice to sever connection to a community of faith. This choice grows out of the conviction that

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traditional communities do not foster spiritual development, and ironically, may even be inimical to it, especially in relation to sexuality and gender.

The perceived demand for exclusivity in matters of faith, a demand that conflicts with the appeal of religious pluralism, can also reinforce the desire to shed religious belonging in its inherited forms. De-conversion gives rise to the God-shaped gap emblematic of spiritual dislocation.

We can strive to fill this gap in a range of ways, including by absorption in what the late Irish theologian Michael Paul Gallagher refers to vividly as the "enoughness" of everyday life, which can smother openness to transcendence. While this option is generally available only to those able to rely on material security, its effects, Gallagher suggests, is to render Christian faith "not so much incredible as unimagined and even unimaginable."

In a different way, but perhaps to the same effects, the many variants of new atheism, often recycling much of the scientism and rationalism of earlier eras, proffer a vision promising that human intelligence will ultimately answer every question.

In light of these developments, Crowley acknowledges, that "the God who was once familiar, because God was locatable in a religious geography and scientific cosmology, is no longer easily found. The God who was once situated in a known universe of reference and meaning has moved elsewhere." This elsewhere can be difficult for many to find, even when they long to locate God.

When it expresses something other than the idolatry of the self or the refusal to accept that the world and God could be bigger than our ideas about them, the spiritual but not religious of the nones can represent a search for the God who no longer dwells unmistakably where God used to dwell. Beyond an acknowledgment of the insufficiency of past forms of faith to meet the needs of the present, this search suggests an orientation to the future, even if there is no clarity about how to move towards that future. The dynamics of spiritual dislocation apply, too, to forms of ecclesial life, the third and final form of dislocation.

"Catholics among the de-converted and disaffiliated," argues Tom Beaudoin, "are likely to be those with a Catholic heritage, however nominal, who cannot find Catholicism central to the everyday project of their lives, and who are in varying degrees of distance from what they take to be normative or prescribed Catholicism."

Since popular perception of the Catholic Church associates it primarily, often exclusively, with a highly structured polity and mechanisms for authoritative teaching, alienation from the normative seems to leave little room for belonging. Hence, ecclesial dislocation. In a way that channels the concerns of the nones, Pope Francis argues that estrangement from the Catholic community proliferates when officeholders in the Church speak more about law than about grace, more about the Church than about Christ, more about the pope than about God's Word.

On a related theme, Johann Baptist Metz asserts that the Church is paying the price for a way of dealing with the people that seems to be too protectionistic. It is paying the price for the fact that, while the Church certainly wants to be a church for the people, it is too little a

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church of the people. That failure fuels the sense that the Church is a remote institution, committed to its own continuance and the privilege of its leaders rather than to being a venue for an encounter with the merciful God, an encounter in which all believers can share unconditionally.

When these obstacles to a Church able to reflect the expansiveness of God are compounded by the pettiness and mediocrity to which clericalism is prone and by the impact of clerical sexual abuse, a cascade of ecclesial dislocation results. Equally, since that change in the Church is unlikely, even impossible, tends to harden ecclesial dislocation, leaving little hope for the future.

More could be said about the dynamics of ecclesial dislocation, but 25-plus years of teaching courses on the Church has taught me that most Catholics are more than able to compose their own list of reasonable grounds for disappointment in and weariness with the Church. Such lists are common, but are rarely the whole story. They tend to be the flip side of a desire for a community of faith that will welcome the gifts that each of its members bring, and so become a less ambiguous witness to grace in the world.

Turn now to a third part of the presentation, faith and the possibility of a future. To begin considering the future of faith in an atmosphere of dislocation, I'll draw on Evelyn Underhill herself, the inspiration for this series of lectures.

In a letter written in 1930 to Cosmo Lang, then the Archbishop of Canterbury, Underhill decried the emphases of the Church of England in her day. She was especially critical of a lack of spiritual depth amongst the clergy, whom she assessed as unable to talk about what ought to be the church's primary focus.

"God is the interesting thing about religion," she wrote, "and people are hungry for God." For Underhill, the inability of the church to meet that hunger manifested itself in what she categorized as "the dreary character of many church services, a dreariness likely to hasten the alienation of people from the church."

Underhill's observations are important for two reasons. First, as a reminder to us that we are not the only people who have ever lived at a time when the appeal of faith was waning, and when the practices of the church exacerbated its own decline.

The fact that neither the appeal of faith nor the place of the community of faith in the life of a society are guaranteed shows that human beings are not programmed to be people of faith. Faith must always be a choice. True, Christian faith does profess that the Spirit of Christ is an abiding presence for each and all of us, but the Spirit is a gift, one to be received or rejected rather than a coercive presence.

None of us knows the extent to which we have responded to the Spirit. And certainly, none of us can make that assessment about anyone else. But the listlessness of the community that Underhill identifies is a reliable sign that we are restraining the Spirit, seeking to conform the Spirit to our levels of comfort rather than allowing the Spirit to blow where it wills.

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If such circumstances persist, the best that can be hoped for is that faith and the church might survive like an appendix. Might survive as what Rahner, in a withering phrase, refers to as "A few representatives left over as a sort of atavistic remnant from the past." Clearly, such a state would not reflect all that the Spirit can enable.

Second thing to note in Underhill's letter is that she was neither seeking a new version of faith, tailored exclusively to her time and place, what we might now call Faith 2.0, nor claiming that better techniques in preaching would secure the future of faith, as desirable as better preaching might be. Rather, she was expressing confidence that God's time had not passed. God could be effective in the lives of the people, and the church could be an instrument of that effectiveness if the church, in speaking of God, should itself be transformed by what she named "an experience of God, mystery, holiness, and prayer."

Viewed with a helping of postmodern suspicion, we may be inclined to think that Underhill's appeal is naive. After all, can't God, the Word, be manipulated for all sorts of purposes that it actually intensifies spiritual and ecclesial dislocation? Didn't, for example, the Attorney General of the United States, just a few weeks ago, quote from the Gospel to support the administration's treatment of those seeking asylum at the Southern border?

Although human beings, as that example shows, are capable of transforming God into an idol, Underhill was seeking the liberation of the God whose ways are not our ways. This God, who is other than an idol, can even be passionately committed to solidarity with us in our experiences of dislocation.

Creation, the covenants with Israel, and especially the Incarnation, express God's own dislocation for our sake. Dislocated God may be, but through the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, God assures us not simply of a future, but of a present in which we can live as people of hope.

What Underhill grasped passionately is that an encounter with the God who meets us in our dislocation, and in so doing opens for us the possibility of something other than a reflection of our own limits, it is this God who is the fuel of faith. There can certainly be arguments to support faith, but the arguments come second. At the heart of Christian faith is not a better argument than its critics can advance, but something radically different, something more fully human, an invitation to a relationship with God, and through God with others.

The idea of a relationship with a God who cares for every sparrow and even the hairs on our head may well be appealing, but relationships, as we know, are tricky. Properly understood, they are the antithesis of a controlled environment.

As Rahner observes, "Every trusting, loving relationship to another human being has an uncancellable plus on the resolution and decision side of the balance sheet as over against the reflective side, the side that tallies up the justifiability and reasonableness of such risk and venture." Once again, "Every trusting, loving relationship to another human being has an uncancellable plus on the resolution and decision side of the balance sheet as over against the reflective side, the side that tallies up the justifiability and reasonableness of such risk and venture."

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In other words, while we must do due diligence about relationships, we cannot eliminate their risk. Here we see up close what it means to describe faith as surrender, an idea to which I referred earlier in the text. This is not faith as irrational, but it is the faith that exceeds calculation. Calculation, of course, is important. It is part of what we do as humans. Nonetheless, "calculation," as John Henry Newman acknowledges, "never made a hero."

So, is the surrender of faith still possible today? I'd suggest that what can enable it and nurture it is the recognition that it calls forth from us all that is most fully human. This claim finds support in two aspects of faith. The first comes as what Crowley names "the dislocation of discipleship." By this he means not that discipleship itself has become dislocated, but that discipleship involves allowing ourselves to be changed, to lose our familiar bearings. "In discipleship," he argues, "the unmoored God finds us in the newness of surrender to the sufferings of others."

It is through our discipleship that we come to understand more about God, about our souls, and about how it is that losing our lives can be the means by which we find it. Discipleship captures what Pope Francis identifies as the markers of Christian life: a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. This is not a version of Christianity without God, not the Christian community as a religious NGO, but faithfulness to the dislocated God who becomes incarnate in history.

Even in the age of the nones, part of whose critique of existing religious forms is that they lack a cutting edge, discipleship offers an alternative to a community of faith mired in self-absorption or in the debilitating but largely futile culture wars.

In "*Gaudete et Exsultate*," the most recent major statement of Pope Francis, he states that "Holiness is the most attractive face of the Church." Holiness is the most attractive face of the Church. For Francis, holiness, which grows through openness to the Spirit of Christ, is not an otherworldly ideal. As he explains, "We cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in the world where some revel, spend with abandon, and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty."

If the call to discipleship is to be perceived as something other than any position and a restraint on our freedom, it needs to be understood and discerned within the context of a loving relationship. The God of Jesus Christ is at the heart of that relationship. But as we are human beings and experience our God sacramentally, it is a relationship that includes others as well.

This brings us to the second key aspect of the dynamics of faith. Faith is held in common with others. This reality does not obviate the need for individual commitment, but it shows that faith reflects a central aspect of being human, our existence as social beings.

The social nature of humanity is central to Scripture's presentation of the Covenant between God and Israel. The Triune God forms a covenant not with atomized individuals, but with a people, a people that is constituted as such by being brought together in relationship with God. For Christians, as Pope Francis emphasizes:

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"Community is an irreducible element of faith. Faith," Francis says, "is not simply an individual decision which takes place in the depths of the believer's heart, nor a completely private relationship between the I of the believer and the divine Thou, between an autonomous subject and God. By its very nature, faith is open to the we of the Church. It always takes place within her communion. Faith is not simply an individual decision which takes place in the depths of the believer's heart, nor a completely private relationship between the I of the believer and the divine Thou. By its very nature, faith is open to the we of the church. It always takes place within her communion."

The difficulty here, as we have seen, is that the ecclesial dimension of faith is especially problematic today. Still, the Church, too, is a relationship. As with every relationship, the hope is that all who form the Church are willing to be self-critical, open to learn from each other, and to change in response to what is learned.

Evaluated in the light of those criteria, it's obvious there's a long way for our Church to go. The possibilities for a healthy ecclesial faith require a fuller discussion. Indeed, a course. Welcome to my day job. [LAUGHTER]

But a key building block of those possibilities is especially applicable to all of us. The gift of Jesus and the Spirit in God's Word and sacrament, the gift that the Church holds and that summons it to discipleship, is a gift that calls all members to conversion, to make room for the God who is always bigger than our ideas about God. Consequently, my need for conversion is as broad, deep, and urgent as that of all other members of the Church, even of those who I'm sure God finds to be far more incorrigible than me.

My conversion is not a magical solution to all that lessens the appeal of the Church, nor does it render unnecessary the panoply of reforms that we might all desire, and for which we can continue to advocate. It is, however, the beginning of difference. Most importantly, it is something for which only I can take responsibility.

So after all this, is faith beyond its use-by date? Is there, to reframe the question as a reflection of the lecture's subtitle, a future for faith? In answer to the first question, I'd want to say "no" with an asterisk. For the second, "yes," again, with an asterisk.

The asterisks are not to provide wiggle room for prevarication, or even to footnote the phrase beloved of advertisers, "Conditions apply." Rather, they underscore that we can never take faith for granted. As the expression of the relationship between God and us, faith has seasons. Not because God is unreliable or unpredictable, but because we can be.

The Holy Spirit assures us that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Trust in that assurance enables us to be people of hope, people who practice what Rahner refers to wonderfully as "the gentler and more modest joy, appropriate to living between Good Friday and Easter." The Spirit doesn't promise that all our desires, even our best ones, will be realized. But it does stir our imagination to recognize that no failure, no obstacle can be final.

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A future for faith, a future in which all that God enables continues to transform our world and our souls, requires not a formula to follow, but imagination and creativity born of God's grace. The spirit received at baptism, the spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline, stimulates our creativity, the creativity essential to imagining faith in today's world.

As the British theologian Ann Loades contends,

"Being Christian engages imagination and emotion, energy and passion, not as extra to belief, but as integral, central to it. For if these dimensions of our lives are not engaged, can we effectively and seriously believe in any case? Being Christian engages imagination and emotion, energy and passion, not as extra to belief, but as integral, central to it. For if these dimensions of our faith are not engaged, can we effectively and seriously believe in any case?"

It is precisely for the engagement of our imagination in the life of faith that Pope Francis calls at the end of "*Gaudete ex Exsultate*." "Let us rethink," he says, "our usual way of doing things. Let us open our eyes and our ears, and above all our hearts, so as not to be complacent about things as they are, but unsettled by the living and effective work of the Risen Lord."

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This challenge is a response to dislocation, a response that is about neither blame nor return, but looks towards God's future, which discipleship can embody now. We cannot know where our graced imaginations might take us as individuals, as a church, and as part of the wider world.

What we can hope for and desire is an ever-deeper encounter with and more expansive response to what Pope Francis names "the eternal newness of God." This newness comes without a use-by date. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

Melinda Brown Donovan: Thank you so much, Richard. What an inspiring and challenging lecture. And now as is our custom, we'll unpack what we've heard with some conversation. And we'll start with conversation with each other.

So take four or five minutes and talk to a neighbor or two around you. You might want to talk about what stands out in what you heard, what might have invited you to think differently, what you want to remember, and maybe what questions arise. And we'll regather again in about five minutes and open it up to the large group for question and answer.

Participant: First off, thank you so much. I'm actually in from out of town, and this was just a beautiful gift to be able to share that with you. So my question is— [APPLAUSE]— Thank you. [LAUGH] My question is specifically with regard to creativity within the structures of the church. I'm reminded of a sociological study where children are placed on

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a playground, and the children who had a fence around them were more likely to explore outward than the children who were placed in the playground without a fence. So they huddled together and kind of stayed in their own confines. So my question is, especially with regard to the ecclesial dislocation and being able to share productively in this creativity of the Holy Spirit, how do we balance the newness and creativity that the Spirit inspires and license that often comes with postmodernism?

Fr. Lennan: Mm-hmm. Thank you. You used the word balance, which I think is precisely the right word. I don't think there's a formula to this. Francis, to keep repeating the document I was quoting most there, the "*Gaudete ex Exsultate*," has a long section on discernment reflecting his own Jesuit grounding. And he makes the point that discernment is neither finding a way to do what I was going to do anyway—[LAUGHTER] Discernment's a wonderful word for that. [LAUGHTER]

But nor is discernment something where I'm trying to find where I'm going to be stopped. So I think so much of the life of faith is not something that can be set within a formula. It does have to be discerned, and in the context of the church, it requires us to discern. That there's been an enormous energy in the last, say, 10, 15 years in writing about the church on the whole idea of the *sensus fidei* and the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of faith that each of us has and that we have together.

But in order for that to be effective, we need to keep growing as communities. So within those boundaries, which are not hard rock walls—they're very fluid. Because the ultimate thing of the Spirit is to lead us forward, not simply—I mean, the Spirit can perform this great trick. It can keep us anchored and move us at the same time. And our task is trying to discern what that looks like. And discerning that together is clearly a big issue, a big task.

As a Church, we have almost zero practice of doing that, and that's part of what makes it so difficult. And when the whole topic comes up, people can go first to, "Well, this could go badly wrong." And of course, it could go badly wrong, but it could also go wonderfully well.

What we need is practice of doing it, and practice of doing it at every level of the Church's life. So what happens in any group in a parish all the way up to what happens at the Vatican.

In the last couple of synods of bishops, one of the words that Francis repeatedly used is this word *parrhesia* which means boldness. He was encouraging the bishops to be bold, not to say, "What's the pope going to think if I say this?" You know, not to be looking over your shoulder.

Now boldness is not the same as being aggressive, but it is the willingness to do the discernment and offer what we have. And part of the challenge for all of us is to learn that when we offer something and people reject it, doesn't mean that we weren't listened to.

So, what we're trying to get to is, how is this win-win rather than win-lose? The life of faith isn't meant to be a zero-sum game where there can only be one winner. We're all meant to be winners. So that's a long and rambling answer that says, there's no shortcuts here. But these are the ingredients of it, I think.

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Participant: Thank you so much.

Fr. Lennan: Thanks.

Participant: Thank you very much, Richard, for your talk, especially the issue of imagination. In 1984, Catholic University of America, I was in class with Ladislav Orsy, and he said to us, *novus habitus mentis*, new way of thinking. How do we bring that into the life of the clergy especially? You made a reference in your talk how difficult imagination is, but especially in relating to clergy. And as a member of the clergy of the Archdiocese of Boston, I sometimes bang my head against the wall. [APPLAUSE]

Fr. Lennan: Part of imagination, particularly in the life of the Church and particularly in the context of thinking about priesthood is to recognize—and perhaps it reflects on what we're talking about previously—that it's neither anti-structure, nor is it reducible to structure.

So there's a long line in our Church that includes people like Newman and certainly includes Rahner and all of that generation of Vatican II who lived under a cloud through much of their life. So our imagination and our good ideas are not always going to be accepted. I mean, reflecting on the Sunday readings and even the weekday readings at the moment about the prophetic charism, it doesn't guarantee that you're going to be accepted.

And the danger of the prophetic charism, if you like, is where we can think, "Well, I'm right, and nobody else is," which is not what real prophets do. So again, I think all I can do is say, encourage to keep working at it, and to keep trying to name where there are possibilities.

I think one of the things that Francis has done for us as a Church in a short time and dramatically is to put before us that this whole notion of the going to the peripheries, the reclaiming Vatican II on the pilgrimage, the importance of discernment, and 101 other themes that are all the opposite of being static.

He clearly doesn't want a church where it's just neat. I think part of what we have to do is accept that messiness is far more in tune with the Gospel than neatness. And it's the willingness to embrace that—which is not anarchy. I think, as a Church and perhaps particularly as groups of priests, there's this tendency to see where it can go wrong first rather than where there could be possibilities. I think it's the conversion on that level.

Hope is not about what we control, but what we surrender to what we don't control. So there's no magic answers here, and the only answers are the ones that we've had for 2,000 years that we need to keep being converted to. Namely, to trust in the leading of the Spirit.

Participant: Towards the end of your lecture, you used the metaphor of faith as having seasons, right? In your experiences as a pastor, as an academic, a man of faith, collectively, what season would you say we find ourselves in as God's people right now, and why?

Fr. Lennan: Thanks, Gus. Rahner read famously a book in the late seventies, early eighties, just before he died called *Faith in a Wintry Season*. And his sense then was that as a Church, we were living through winter. And people in the context of ecumenism often speak about the winter of ecumenism that we've been living through. The only sort of redeeming feature about winter, even in New England—[LAUGHTER]—being someone who

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still can't fully acclimatize to winter, is that we know it's not the end. So winter allows us to look forward to spring. So naming our present moment as winter isn't necessarily about giving up. It's trying to find, where also are there signs of spring?

I think it's difficult to overstate the impact that Pope Francis has had in the last five years in terms of nurturing a sense that there could be a spring. And that came, as it were, from nowhere. Those sorts of things have to be held onto, because if we want to get to summer-- and not, of course, that summer is the end either, because it leads onto the next one.

And that's part of the thing. It's accepting we're not going to get to the end here. This has no end, and that the seasons will continue. They might not be the same, and they might not reflect precisely the influences that are making our seasons what they are at the moment. Nonetheless, they will be seasons.

So how do we, in the midst of those seasons, live as people of hope? I think that's the constant question for who we are as Church. How do we keep reclaiming and deepening our hope? And that, as I said, is what for me, more than anything else, Francis is doing for the Church.

Participant: Richard, if you had a classroom full of nones N-O-N-E-S, or a room full of family, friends, acquaintances, all of them nones who feel absolutely no lack in their life for not believing in God or necessarily attending to spiritual realities, how would you conduct the conversation assuming they were willing to enter into it? Because I think we all are having more and more people in our lives who are in that situation, and it's hard to know how to have any interaction advertent to faith.

Fr. Lennan: Thanks, Suzanne. [APPLAUSE] I quoted in the presentation Michael Paul Gallagher's notion of "enoughness," which I find enormously helpful, that the whole idea of a spiritual life is that we are extended beyond what we perceive to be enough in our present.

Now it's not then a matter of telling people, "Well, you're just settling for something." It's trying to name why more is possible, and why the alternative to the enoughness is actually going to be challenging. So it's not, how do we market this better? It's not McDonald's faith. It's, how do we actually keep reclaiming the authenticity of what faith is?

That's why I think the emphasis on discipleship is irreducible. That's all we are. That's all we have in the end. I mentioned before about Underhill that she wasn't looking for Faith 2.0. When I started working on this and thinking about this over the last few months, one of the things I kept saying to myself was, do I have to come up with a better version of faith that's going to be more, as it was, sellable?

But in fact, that's not what we can take responsibility for. And ultimately, of course, we can't take responsibility for this having a good effect. Seems to me that what we're responsible for is our own faithfulness. What happens after that, what happens because of it, it has to be left up to God.

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Now whether—because as Catholics, we had this sense of what we used to be like, but that doesn't mean that that was necessarily a good thing. We have to learn to see our past not as black and white, but full of all sorts of complexities, just as our future will be and just as our present is.

So I guess, Suzanne, the short answer to your question is that what we can do is keep naming what's the richness that we have found, and keep trying to live out of that, including its challenges, being able to explain why this matters. How people then receive or don't receive it is not something we can take responsibility for.

I don't think we can make ourselves not sleep at night because of this. There's a difference between caring about it and thinking that I'm responsible for it. What I'm responsible for is what I can do. If I do that as well as I can, then God can stay awake at night, as John the Twenty-Third said. [LAUGHTER]

Participant: Hi. My name is Albert, and I want to talk about the other kinds of nuns, the people who deeply care about God and believe in the newness of God, and that newness of God does not have an expiration date. But they believe somehow institutional church does have an expiration date, and it has reached it. In other words, for them to pursue continual spiritual journey in authentic ways, they find it increasingly more difficult to do it inside of the institutional church than outside the institutional church.

They do believe in the community of disciples, but they do—I mean, what would you say about the institutional church having the expiration date? And what would you respond to the people who believe that it has reached that date?

Fr. Lennan: Thank you. It would only have reached that date if we gave up on the Gospel, and if we gave up on the possibility of our own conversion. I must say, I don't like and resist the phrase "the institutional church," because the danger is we're implying there's a non-institutional church.

But institutions are what we do. Institutions are what enables us to be together. Institutions are neither bad nor good. They're simply a reality. They're part of how we organize our lives as human beings. They're what enables all of us to be on the planet at the same time. So it's not institutions per se that's the problem. It's how institutions can be so caught up in their own survival that they cease to lose sight, lose sight of—sorry, they lose sight of what their purpose is.

So I'm not in any way willing to say, well, if we just got rid of the institution, it would all be better. No. If we got rid of the institution, we'd have no way to be together. Institutions allow us to be together. And in that sense, they actually have a positive value.

What we have to ensure is that they keep serving that value, that they keep open to the possibility of change and growth. And that gets us to the themes where we started with, with the questions, namely, how do we hear the different voices?

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I think to say, "I'm opposed to institutions and I'd never belong to one," is actually to do precisely but ironically what Elizabeth Johnson was saying: to construct too small of a rock on which to stand. None of us gets out of faith according to our own designs.

I start my Church course at times with my ten points about the Church, and one of them is, nobody gets the church they designed for themselves. [LAUGHTER] And nobody does, because the Church is already full of other people, and it's brought about by God.

The other corollary of that is that there's no such thing as a perfect church, but if you want one, I have a three-point formula. Start your own, don't let anyone join [LAUGHTER], and don't join it yourself. [LAUGHTER]

Do those three things, you have a perfect church. Outside of that, you have the reality we have that's complex and that's messy, and that unquestionably stands constantly in need of reform. But the reform has to come from our listening to the Spirit. And to say that the Spirit can't work in the institution is to sell the Spirit short. So there are the elements of my answer to that.

Participant: All right. My name is Joe Cabanes. I want to thank you very much for a wonderful speech today. And I'd like to bring up a topic that's not been mentioned at all in the whole society for the past 17 years. That's the peace movement. It's been very, very quiet.

I was a soldier in Vietnam, and the people who protested out there in the sixties, I'm alive today because I was withdrawn from Vietnam earlier than my tour. We had Thomas Merton, we had the Berrigan brothers, Dorothy Day, leaders in the peace movement. Boston College kicked out ROTC. We have a 17-year war now, and I've been out in the street for 16 years, giving out flyers. I'm at church. I say, "Peace be to you" at Mass every time I go, and I don't see anybody out from the Catholic Church.

I belong to Pax Christi in Boston, Catholic group. There's seven or eight of us at a meeting. We haven't expanded in four or five years. It's just unbelievable to think that we have a war that is condemned by the pope, and we have a Jesuit school here in Boston, and we're training students to fight in a war that is condemned by a Jesuit pope.

And it's very difficult to see... my faith, I still have faith in the Church, because it's just, it's ingrained in me, my DNA. But I look at the peace movement as shrinking down. Even the bishops of the United States say zero when it comes to peace. All right. Thank you.

Fr. Lennan: Thank you. [APPLAUSE] All I can say is that you name a dimension of our life as Church that has to be part of discipleship. Where it begins at the local level and in the level of how each of us lives our relationships in peace as people who seek to be peacemakers provides the basis for something bigger, for the sort of movement that you're talking about. And that's part of what our constant conversion is, I think. Conversion to that part of the Beatitudes about being peacemakers. But I take your point about that, that needs then to expand and deepen into structural reform as well. Thank you.

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Participant: Hi. I join with all the many voices that are so grateful for your talk today. And I feel inspired by Pope Francis's invitation to be bold, and also by your insight into the eternal newness of God having no expiration date.

The Church has a long history of excluding certain people from certain sacraments, and there seems to be no current path that I can see out of that. And so the word balance in my mind doesn't seem to apply, nor does discernment, unless the statement the pope next comes out with says, "In order to achieve balance, I have discerned by the grace of the Holy Spirit that from now on, we will no longer exclude certain people from certain sacraments."

I would say that today, God is ordaining women and married people and LGBT folks. God is marrying LGBT folks and those previously divorced. God is communicating non-Catholics. And it is the church's task to catch up, because the newness of God has no expiration date.

Fr. Lennan: Thank you. [APPLAUSE] Two things. First, unquestionably there's room that we need to keep moving. There's no doubt about that. Second thing is that part of where we are as a Church—and this is part of the complexity of believing in common, is trying to maintain the unity while also being able to act prophetically. And there are situations, I think, where as a church, we simply don't know how to do that at the moment. We don't know how to maintain both what we believe about marriage and how to include LGBT people, as well as make access to Eucharist more available. That's the tension where we are.

Now lots of people have, "Okay, you've got to do this" or "you've got to do that." I think as a church, we're simply lost without a struggle with this. That then gives rise to two things again. One is, what enables me to live in that complexity? What relationships with God and with other people allows me to live in that space, knowing that it is going to be frustrating?

And the second aspect is, how do then we still, acknowledging that, keep moving? Keep not just saying, "Well, that's all that can be done, and we're never going to move again," but allow our souls to be disturbed by the questions. And that's what you're proposing, and I endorse that. Thank you. I think we have time for just one more question, if possible.

Participant: Oh, I think I'm—over here. Hi.

Fr. Lennan: Oh, I see.

Participant: That's all right. I guess my question is a follow-up to the previous one, because here I am. I'm in the church. I'm a graduate of Weston. I work as a professional in ministry. I'm a mother of children that I'm bringing up in the Church. But there is a point at which I say, how do I continue to belong to this family that I love and that I don't want to leave and has a claim on my heart, specifically as a woman?

And the question is, how far is reaching out? And I'm not asking for a yes or no or a boundary answer. But there are a lot of communities where women are becoming leaders, where again, God is ordaining women. And yet, if we go to those, there's the idea that we're leaving our home, and also that we don't have the institution, the good parts of the

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institution that we grew up with, and the history and the culture and everything that makes us who we are minus the things that we want to leave behind.

So I guess I just ask in the tension of belonging: belonging, suffering, enduring, and being prophetic. It's a tough combination, and I would just like to hear what you have to say about that.

Fr. Lennan: Okay, thank you. First, I wouldn't in any way minimize the difficulty. I recognize the struggle that you're describing, and I recognize that that's a struggle for many, many people in our Church. And in a very particular way, for women in our Church. No question about that.

I think it's got to be something more than sheer endurance, because that's hardly life giving. It's hardly a reflection of what the Spirit is enabling. The great big picture is that what enables us to continue to hope for change, for that discernment of hearing voices of people who suffer from the way things are, I think we absolutely need to keep doing that.

The more immediate thing is, what is going to nurture your belonging to the Church at the moment? And it's being alert to those things. It's not going to be something that is either 0% or 100%. It's going to be a lot more cloudy picture than that.

I think what we can do is try and see with our goodwill and our desire to belong where the signs that are going to help me belong, even if they're not going to give me everything that I need. So that what I'm doing in that space is more than enduring. There is a space where I can be created. Because that, I think, is what the Spirit is enabling for all of us.

The big picture changes hopefully will come too. But for the moment, it's what enables me to find a space where I can live creatively as part of this, and with other people. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

[MUSIC PLAYING]