

Excerpt from

*Seeds of Hope for U.S. Catholicism* (Paulist Press, 2008)

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### Seeds of Hope

[Jesus said,] “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen.” (Matthew 13: 3-9)

Jesus’ parable of the sower is a blueprint for the future of the American Catholic Church. There are many who seek to take the role of the sower—the one who distributes wisdom liberally across all ideological spectra, expecting it to take root and bear fruit in justice, goodness, and peace. Yet it is a sobering reflection; it suggests to us that social change is not as simple as speaking loudly about beliefs. For decades—indeed, centuries—Catholics have expected that their leaders would speak loudly, and thereby produce a yield of faithful followers. That model, while influential in the shaping of the modern world, is unpersuasive for many. The future of Catholic faith will not primarily be a function of good preaching or proclamation. The ground has become almost infertile, and must be worked before the seed can take root.

There is a note of hope, though, behind this sobering reflection. Jesus does not tell us in the parable how it came to be that some soil was rich. It is provocative to imagine that the rich soil became so because of the decay of refuse over time—a compost heap of abandoned ideas, worldviews that have grown passé, texts that have faded into the background of history. Decay of older matter fertilizes the soil, making it ready to

produce new fruit. Perhaps this lesson also applies to social change for those of us who live in the shadows of the cultural revolutions of the twentieth century Church. Perhaps even as conservatives and liberals, advocates of neoscholasticism or of liberation theology, advocates for return to the Tridentine mass or champions of liturgical change continue to wage their ideological battles amidst the greying of the Vatican II generation, even now there are growing what Justin Martyr called in the second century “seeds of the word” among younger Catholics. Perhaps even as we witness the decay of public discourse among entrenched older Catholics, younger ones unaware of the nature of the current debates are discovering that the worldview they have inherited from postmodern American society is suffocating. Many have recognized the corrupt nature of this worldview, and have begun to ask deeply spiritual questions—seeds which, if cultivated, will sprout into radically new expressions of Christian faith.

This book will propose ways of envisioning a Church that will cultivate these seeds of hope. It will address two related concerns. The first is that of young people, many who have been raised Catholic, but who believe that the Catholic Church has become irrelevant and unresponsive to their needs. The second is that of older Catholics who are concerned by forces in American society that seem to be eroding the faith of young people. What I will propose in this book is that the hope of American Catholicism is its unique power to present a worldview that challenges the extremes of postmodern American culture: a worldview that does greater justice to the fundamental yearnings of the human heart.

This is at once a theological and practical proposal. Theologically, it takes seriously our desires for meaning, for hope, and for justice, by paying attention to

Catholic tradition as a deposit of wisdom about human flourishing in relationship with God. Practically, it recognizes the gross disparities in our nation and in our world, which hamper our abilities to live fully integrated lives. It suggests that these disparities force us to confront how our spiritual yearnings must lead us to grow beyond selfish approaches to spirituality, and to confront fundamental questions about what it means to respond to the will of God in a fractured, unjust world. Personal spirituality is an important movement in the lives of all people, and it is good that we cultivate spiritual growth—as long as it does not descend into narcissistic idolatry of the self. Authentic spiritual growth must involve joining with others to address systemic questions about the social sins of poverty, racism, classism, sexism, and others. Ideally, a Catholic worldview ought to bind us together as a community of hopeful vision, one which seeks the will of God sometimes in union with, sometimes in contrast to, prevailing cultural norms. It ought to be a community in pilgrimage toward God. I want to suggest that to the extent that it seeks this kind of authenticity, it will not only attract young people in their hunger for spirituality; it will also be a transforming force in the world.

I seek to construct a hopeful vision of Catholicism in the United States, recognizing that it has sometimes failed as an institution to invite people to consider its tradition of reflection on what constitutes the good life and the good society. It is based on the observation that American Catholicism holds a great deal of power to influence both members and the wider American society, even in the wake of sexual abuse scandals. Today, our challenge as Catholics is to recognize the way our Church has failed to follow Jesus' example, and to engage in the process of renewal. Forty years have passed since the close of the Second Vatican Council, which was the most

significant renewal movement in modern Church history. Today, as the generation born after the Council reaches adulthood, we must again face the challenging questions that Christians of all ages must face: what does Jesus' teaching mean for us? How must I live? What must we do as a society to practice justice? In short, this book seeks to offer a model of how the Catholic Church in the United States can again respond to "the signs of the times." More fundamentally, it suggests that the Catholic Church—in its communion centered in Rome and with its increasingly global orientation—is unique in its social and political power to foster a vision of human living that truly dignifies the person, often in contrast to the prevailing moral norms of popular culture in the United States (and indeed, the world).