DISTINCTIVE CATHOLICISM: U.S. CATHOLICS’ VIEWS ON HUMAN NATURE

BRIAN STARKS
Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness... God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good. (Genesis 1: 26, 30)

(Original sin) is a deprivation of original holiness and justice, but human nature has not been totally corrupted; it is wounded in the natural powers proper to it... Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ's grace, erases original sin and turns a man back toward God, but the consequences for nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 405)

Christian anthropology is an important site of theological debate: competing religious traditions make divergent claims regarding human beings’ goodness, sinfulness, corruption, free will, cooperation with grace, and more. The Catholic Church has consistently reflected and preached on what scripture and tradition reveal about humanity’s nature, and in this report, I use nationally representative survey data to highlight American Catholics’ distinctive views on the topic. Catholics tend to hold a more positive view of humanity than other U.S. Christians. While Catholics’ relatively optimistic view of human nature persists across generations, broader generational shifts are also apparent, as younger generations of Catholics, along with their peers in other traditions, exhibit greater ambivalence (or perhaps cynicism) regarding human nature than earlier generations.
EXPLORING VIEWS OF HUMAN NATURE
USING NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SURVEY DATA

Few nationally representative surveys ask respondents about their personal understanding of human nature. An important exception in the 1980s was the Notre Dame Study of Parish Life. In an imaginative series of questions, Catholic parishioners were asked about the accuracy of various images of human nature: as mainly evil, as sinful, as selfish, as not perfectible, as competitive, as mainly good, and as cooperative. Later, from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, the General Social Survey (GSS) explored the broader U.S. public’s views with an item asking whether humans were basically good or fundamentally perverse and corrupt. Respondents could place themselves at either of these extremes or at various intermediate points between them. Since the GSS stopped including this item in 1998, however, few surveys have fielded questions investigating popular views of human nature, and, subsequently, few researchers have studied the topic.

In this report, I use data from the Religion and Public Activism Study (RAPAS) to explore U.S. Catholics’ views of human nature and compare their views with those of members of other faiths (and also those of no faith). RAPAS, a random-digit dial national phone survey, was undertaken in 2002 and provides a nationally representative sample of 2,897 U.S. adults, including 718 Catholics. The study focuses on religion, social trust, and volunteering and asked adults, including 718 Catholics. The study focuses on religion, social trust, and volunteering and asked adults, including 718 Catholics.

Although it is more than a few years old, RAPAS has a number of advantages over other studies for my purposes. First, it is more recent than either the ND Study of Parish Life or the GSS surveys that asked about human nature. Second, it includes an especially large national sample that allows us to make confident conclusions about differences between religious traditions, within Catholicism, and across generations. Third, it incorporates a robust set of religious measures to explore (and control for) in my analyses.

I aim to answer a simple question in this report: Do American Catholics view human nature differently than adherents of other faith traditions in the U.S.? Using nationally representative survey data and quantitative modeling to compare and contrast Catholics and those in other faith traditions, I explore generational shifts and search for differences between traditional and liberal Catholics in their views of human nature. In making these comparisons, I challenge some contemporary understandings of secularism and consider whether U.S. Catholics exhibit a distinct “Catholic imagination.” I conclude my report with a clear-eyed discussion of its limitations and suggest ways to advance research on this topic in the future.

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Figure 1: Views of Human Nature by Religious Tradition

Almost three thousand respondents were each asked, “Do you think that human beings are basically good, basically sinful, or both good and sinful?” Figure 1 displays respondents’ views sorted by religious tradition, from those most likely to answer “basically good” to those least likely to say the same. A couple of important similarities between traditions are noteworthy. First, both good and sinful is the most popular view of human nature among all groups, with over 50 percent of members of each religious tradition (and of the non-religious as well) selecting this option. Furthermore, basically sinful is the least popular view among all groups. Thus, the ordering of choices by popularity is identical across groups. Nevertheless, there are significant differences between groups in the percentages of members selecting each option.

What are the differences? Overall, U.S. Catholics hold an optimistic view of human nature. They are significantly more likely than the rest of the U.S. population to view human nature as basically good: 42.8 percent of Catholics vs. just 30.8 percent of all non-Catholics select this response. Using simple group comparison tests (with no controls for other factors), Catholic respondents are significantly more likely than Evangelical Protestant, Black Protestant, and non-religious respondents to choose the “basically good” option. (However, they are not significantly different from Jewish respondents, Mainline Protestants, or respondents who identified as some other religion.) Furthermore, as the orange bars on the right side of Figure 1 show, Catholic respondents are the least likely to consider human nature “basically sinful.” Only 2.2 percent of Catholics select this option, versus 8.1 percent of non-Catholics. When contrasted with Evangelical Protestants in particular, Catholics see human nature as distinctly less sinful.

COMPARING RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Almost three thousand respondents were each asked, “Do you think that human beings are basically good, basically sinful, or both good and sinful?” Figure 1 displays respondents’ views sorted by religious tradition, from those most likely to answer “basically good” to those least likely to say the same. A couple of important similarities between traditions are noteworthy. First, “both good and sinful” is the most popular view of human nature among all groups, with over 50 percent of members of each religious tradition (and of the non-religious as well) selecting this option. Furthermore, “basically sinful” is the least popular view among all groups. Thus, the ordering of choices by popularity is identical across groups. Nevertheless, there are significant differences between groups in the percentages of members selecting each option.

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How does religious-service attendance impact views of human nature among U.S. Christians?

To explore the impact of religious service attendance, I focus on the three largest religious groups in our study: Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, and Catholics. I do this because smaller groups make statistically valid comparisons difficult once I cross-classify with multiple variables, as I do here with religious tradition and religious service attendance.

A corresponding pattern emerges in examining the impact of church attendance on viewing human nature as basically sinful; it is merely oriented in the opposite direction. Figure 2 clearly illustrates that religious-service attendance impacts Catholics differently than Mainline and Evangelical Protestants. Whereas high-attending Protestants are less likely than their low-attending counterparts to view human nature as basically good, the opposite is the case for Catholics.

Among Catholics, the most frequent churchgoers are most likely to view human nature as “basically good.” Taking into account religious-service attendance reveals that high-attending Catholics are distinctly optimistic not only in comparison to Evangelical Protestants, but also in comparison to high-attending Mainline Protestants. Fully 47 percent of weekly attending Catholics identify human nature as basically good—which stands in sharp contrast to the 29 percent of Mainline Protestant weekly attenders and the 22 percent of Evangelical Protestant weekly attenders who do so.

However, frequent religious-service attendance is again associated with a more pessimistic view of human nature for Mainline and especially Evangelical Protestants, while the opposite is the case for Catholics. Whereas only about one percent of weekly Catholic attenders identify human nature as basically sinful, about 7 percent of high-attending Mainline Protestants and nearly 20 percent of high-attending Evangelical Protestants do the same.
Exploring Views among Catholics: Traditional, Moderate, and Liberal Catholics

Do self-identified traditional, moderate, and liberal Catholics hold rival views of human nature? Sociologists have become intensely interested in moral polarization and the emergence of competing subcultures within religious traditions. Noting how symbolic boundaries in American religion have been redrawn since World War II, Robert Wuthnow argues that a climate of moral uncertainty, coupled with increasing government intervention into issues of family and sexuality, and growing educational differences within faith traditions has given rise to conflict between religious liberals and religious conservatives. James Davison Hunter similarly argued that the religious divide today is between those who hold two “fundamentally different conceptions of moral authority.” Hunter, like Wuthnow, viewed this conflict as no longer between faith traditions but within them, with differences in moral cosmology replacing those between faith traditions as the basis of a “culture war.”

Surveying the contemporary U.S. religious landscape, I recently explored distinctions between self-identified traditional, moderate, and liberal Catholics. From my in-depth interviews with 50 Midwestern Catholics, I described traditional and liberal Catholics in the following manner:

Traditional Catholics—both in their own self-descriptions and in the eyes of others—enjoy the Church the way it is and are therefore resistant to change. They emphasize the central importance of the Mass. They speak of a desire to live in a world of “black and white,” where the rules of what is right and what is wrong are clearly laid out by an enduring and steadfast Church. Their acceptance of the dictates of the Church serves as a basis for personal humility and reverence as well as institutional vitality, but can lead to charges that they are closed-minded, judgmental, and fail to practice what they preach. For traditional Catholics, it is necessary to preserve and uphold the institutional Church because it is a source of comfort and stability in their lives and, as the repository of the “deposit of faith,” provides moral certitude in uncertain times.

Liberal Catholics, on the other hand, reject some (or many) of the rules of the Church and seek to change the Church and its rules because they want it to be a more inclusive institution. They speak of a desire to live in an open-minded world, where including individuals is more important than following rules. Their search for an inclusive Church through change requires fearlessness in moving outside their comfort zone and the courage to seek continued personal and institutional growth, but leads to charges that they are self-centered or “radical” in their beliefs and lack a genuine commitment to the Church. Liberals believe that it is important that the Church change and become a more inclusive institution because, as the body of Christ, it should be a source of prophetic action in the world.

Do self-identified traditional and liberal Catholics differ in their views of human nature? Perhaps because traditional Catholicism is linked to “devotionalism,” many scholars assume that traditional Catholics are more likely to view human nature as sinful. Jay Dolan, a well-known historian of U.S. Catholics, identifies “devotionalism” as the predominant mode of religion among American Catholics prior to Vatican II. In devotional Catholicism, he writes, “authority, sin, ritual, and the miraculous were the key ingredients of the Catholic ethos.” More recently, Jerome Baggett, elaborating on Dolan’s formulation, argues that devotional Catholicism exhibits a “preoccupation with sin” and sinfulness. Mary Ellen Konieczny’s new book, *The Spirit’s Tether*, similarly asserts that contemporary conservative Catholics rely on a strong discourse of sin in their discussions of parenting, though she contends that all Catholics maintain a strong sense of their children’s goodness.
as well. Her book proposes that the real difference between traditional and liberal Catholics is not that traditional Catholics are preoccupied with sin, but that liberal Catholics lack a robust sense of sin. Whether framed as a preoccupation with sin by traditional Catholics or as the loss of a sense of sinfulness among liberal Catholics, these scholars suggest that conservative and progressive Catholics view human nature differently.

My data do not back up this perception. Catholic respondents in RAPAS were asked, “Thinking about your own religious faith, would you describe yourself as a traditional Catholic, moderate Catholic, or liberal Catholic?” Over 95 percent selected one of these three options, with roughly equal proportions choosing each option (about 1/3 each), while the rest (less than 5 percent of Catholic respondents) either volunteered an alternative identification or responded “I don’t know” to the question.

What views do traditional, moderate, and liberal Catholics hold with regard to human nature? Figure 4 shows Catholics’ responses to the human nature question sorted by religious self-identification as a traditional, moderate, or liberal Catholic, with Mainline and Evangelical Protestants included for comparison. Traditional Catholics are not more likely than other Catholics to view human nature as sinful. In fact, in our sample, traditional Catholics are the most likely to identify human nature as basically good, with 48 percent selecting this option. About 42 percent of liberal Catholics said the same. These small differences between Catholic identities are statistically insignificant. Indeed, our data provide no basis to believe there are substantive differences between traditional, moderate, and liberal Catholics’ views of the goodness or sinfulness of humanity. On the other hand, there are significant differences between traditional Catholics and Mainline Protestants and between all three Catholic groups and Evangelical Protestants: in all cases, Catholics are less likely to describe human nature as “both good and sinful” (and are likelier to emphasize human goodness).

However, Figure 4 does not control for other factors, such as respondents’ level of education, income, work status, marital status, number of children, generation, and religious-service attendance, which could affect the accuracy of our comparisons between Catholic groups. To test whether these factors had such an effect, I controlled for them in separate analyses. These analyses corroborate the conclusion that traditional, moderate, and liberal Catholics are...
indistinguishable in their views regarding the sinfulness or goodness of humanity. I found no statistically significant differences between traditional, moderate, and liberal Catholics: after adjusting for other factors between 43 percent and 46 percent of all three groups believe humans are basically good (see Figure 5). What’s more, the overall similarity of these three groups of Catholics is striking when they are compared to Catholic respondents who do not identify with one of these subcultures. As seen in Figure 5, Catholics who are unable to place themselves within one of the three dominant subcultures (or identities) are less likely to identify human nature as basically good and are more likely to select “both good and sinful.” It appears that accepting any one of these three dominant identities purges respondents in the mainstream of American Catholic life, when it comes to views on human nature.

**GENERATIONAL OR AGE DIFFERENCES IN VIEWS OF HUMAN NATURE**

Although traditional, moderate, and liberal Catholics do not differ in their views on human nature, other attributes are associated with differences among Catholics on this topic. Views of human nature differ across respondents of different generations (see Figure 6).

Jim Davidson has written extensively about the importance of generational differences among Catholics, and I follow his approach in dividing Catholics into pre-Vatican II, Vatican II, and post-Vatican II generations. It is important to distinguish conceptually between generational effects and age effects. As Davidson explains, “Generational effects have to do with the consequences of the experiences people have during their formative years. Age effects have to do with the consequences of passing through the various stages of the life cycle.” Pre-Vatican II Catholics are those born prior to 1941, who entered adulthood prior to Vatican II. Vatican II Catholics, born between 1941 and 1960, are those who lived through Vatican II and the changes arising from it as children or adolescents just entering adulthood. Finally, post-Vatican II Catholics were born after 1960 and have no significant personal memories of pre-Vatican II Catholicism.

The generational divide emerges as a significant source of competing views on human nature among Catholics. Younger, post-Vatican II Catholics are the generation least likely to view humans as “basically good” (36 percent), whereas older pre-Vatican II Catholics are the generation most likely to choose this option (51 percent). Correspondingly, post-Vatican II Catholics are the most likely to choose “both good and sinful,” with 62 percent of them selecting this option, compared to 42 percent of pre-Vatican II Catholics (a difference of 20 percentage points). Younger Catholics appear much less optimistic than older ones about human nature.

We must bear in mind two important cautions in interpreting these results. First, because the data are from only one year, I cannot disentangle age and generation effects. It could be that, rather than generational effects, these are simply age effects: as people get older, they may become more optimistic about human nature. However, I did include a number of important life events in my model—for instance, holding a full-time job, being married, raising children. Since age effects are best understood as consequences of passing through various stages of life, and none of these important life events significantly impacted views of human nature, it seems unlikely that the differences between generations are mainly due to life cycle shifts.

The second caution is that the comparisons made above are limited to Catholics; they may or may not be unique to Catholics. In the next section, I directly compare Catholics to other religious groups.
MODELING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES ACROSS CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

From models comparing Catholics with other Christians, Figures 7-9 display generational differences among Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, and Catholics. While the years of birth for each generation are identical to those in Figure 6, I modify the generational labels here to be more inclusive of non-Catholics. Thus, those born before 1940 are called pre-Boomers, those born from 1941 to 1960 are Boomers, and those born after 1960 are post-Boomers.
Post-Boomer Evangelical Protestants exhibit declines of 12 and 26 percentage points in selecting “basically good” when compared to their Evangelical Boomer and pre-Boomer forebearers (Figure 7). Post-Boomer Evangelicals also display corresponding increases of 14 and 27 percentage points in their choice of “both good and sinful.” Mainline Protestants similarly show declines in optimism among post-Boomers (Figure 8), with declines of 17 and 14 percentage points, when compared to Mainline Boomers and pre-Boomers. Post-Boomer Catholics, when compared to Catholic Boomers and pre-Boomers, exhibit declines of 15 and 18 percentage points, respectively, in their selection of “basically good,” and display increases of 13 and 25 percentage points in their selection of “both good and sinful” (Figure 9).

Thus, in all three Christian traditions, post-Boomers are less likely than older Christians to view human nature as “basically good,” with most of the decline accounted for by an increasing likelihood of viewing human nature as “both good and sinful.” “Basically sinful” remains a decidedly minority view of human nature in the U.S. among all generations. One minor difference between groups is that the decline in optimism appears to begin as early as the Boomer generation for both Evangelicals and Catholics, whereas among Mainline Protestants, Boomers remain just as optimistic as pre-Boomers. However, this difference is not significant in the statistical model. Indeed, the results in Figure 9 for Catholics (from the model examining all Christians) are almost identical to those shown in Figure 6 (using a Catholic-only model): none of the percentages change by more than one or two points. Taken together, Figures 7, 8, and 9 show much more similarity than difference in generational shifts. Thus, the greater focus on sinfulness among post-Boomer Catholics appears not to be a uniquely Catholic generational shift and is instead a generational shift among all Christians in the U.S. toward a less optimistic outlook on human nature.

What if we estimate cohort shifts by examining decade of birth rather than larger generational categories? I do this in Figure 10, and it neatly displays both of the important conclusions of this report. More recent cohorts of Americans appear increasingly pessimistic about human nature. Especially in comparison to Americans born in the 1920s, which was the high-water mark for the “basically good” view, younger generations have increasingly shifted toward a more ambivalent view of human nature as both good and sinful.

**IMPLICATIONS**

What do these findings potentially imply for the Church? Views on human nature shape the sacramental life of the Church and at the same time, the sacramental practices of the Church shape our personal understanding of human nature. There is an exchange between the two. So, what implications does this report have for understanding recent shifts in Catholics’ practice of, for instance, the Sacrament of Reconciliation? This report challenges the notion that Confession is declining because the concept of sin is considered passé. While post-Vatican II Catholics are less likely to regularly practice the Sacrament of Reconciliation, they are more likely than those of earlier generations to describe sinfulness as part of human nature. So it is unlikely that a lack of recognition of sin explains younger Catholics’ relatively infrequent practice of Confession. Experiencing the cumbersome reality of sin, rather than its absence, may be the explaining factor: younger Catholics might feel intimidated by the prospect of speaking honestly about their sins to a priest. On the other hand, a greater resignation or cynicism about sinfulness might be at work. If sinfulness is an acknowledged and persistent reality, cynical younger Catholics may doubt the usefulness or efficacy of Confession, seeing it as unlikely to change anything.

These two very different explanations, and further research is needed to determine if either is accurate. Let me simply point out the important distinctions inscribed in each alternative. The first theory suggests disbelief in the overwhelming mercy of God (sacramentally embodied in the priest), whereas the second suggests unawareness of God’s transforming and redemptive power. Both contradict the idea that kids these days “just don’t believe in sin anymore” and therefore no longer go to Confession because they see it as irrelevant.

Generational shifts in views of human nature could also have deeper impacts on Catholic sacramental life. Recognizing the created world as good is crucial to developing a Catholic sacramental imagination. Catholics’ persistent use of earthly metaphors in depicting and understanding God and our relationship...
with God requires us to see God’s goodness as sacramentially present in the created world. Thus, shifts among younger Catholics away from viewing human nature as “basically good” may presage a larger shift away from what David Tracy termed the analogical (or sacramental) imagination. Put simply, the sacramental imagination may be under duress in the U.S. On the other hand, a shift to “both good and sinful” is not necessarily a shift away from recognizing the basic goodness of humanity and creation, at least not in the same way that a shift toward “basically sinful” would indicate.

Responses to this report will likely be shaped by readers’ own views on this topic. Catholics who emphasize the “basically good” nature of humanity will probably be happy to find that Catholics are distinctively more optimistic than Protestant Christians (perhaps suggesting a continued Thomistic influence within Catholicism), but may be concerned with younger Catholics’ greater ambivalence about Catholicism, but may be concerned with younger Catholics’ greater ambivalence about humanity’s nature. Other Catholic readers who, like the majority of other Americans, emphasize that human nature is “both good and sinful” may interpret the increased willingness of newer Catholics, especially younger Catholics, in our study. What do Catholics mean when they respond “both good and sinful”? Do younger Catholics possess a stronger, more robust sense of sin—with no loss to a robust sense of human goodness? Or do they simply have a weaker, more cynical view of humanity’s goodness? Note that the “both–and” language in this study allows for an interpretation in which goodness and sinfulness are not inversely related. However, respondents may not all interpret their responses this way. In particular, while the study provides a “both–and” response, it does not include a response of “neither basically good nor basically sinful.” Where did respondents who rarely think in terms of “neither basically good nor basically sinful.” end up placing themselves in the “middle” by responding “both good and sinful”?

Conceptualizing the “both–and” option as “in the middle” highlights a problematic way of thinking about sinfulness and goodness for Catholics, for the two are not inversely related. In the Catholic view, it is humanity’s free will—the ultimate expression of our goodness as created in the divine image—that allowed for original sin. Moreover, just as a stain on the Mona Lisa is a greater injury than a similar mark placed on an old magazine cover, the ultimate goodness and dignity of the human person, made in the divine image, actually renders the reality of sin more painfully evocative, not less.

Interpreting these findings about Catholics’ view of human nature is an area ripe for dialogue between sociologists and theologians. Theologians have a deep understanding of the important distinctions about human nature articulated and implied in Catholic teaching, and their knowledge must inform the work of social scientists as we develop survey and interview questions to assess ordinary Catholics’ beliefs. How might social scientists better assess Catholics’ views of human nature and their understandings of Church teachings? What kinds of survey questions might allow us to more finely measure people’s views of human nature? How could survey questions more clearly differentiate between those with robust, thick sensibilities of goodness and sinfulness and those with weak, thin views of each?

Related to the last question is a shortcoming of the survey data that I recognized only after extended reflection on the findings. Because younger generations seem to recognize sin as more constitutive of humanity’s nature than older generations, I initially understood my findings to challenge leading conceptions of the modern moment as “secular.” Young Catholics’ views of humanity certainly contrast with the Rousseauian view of human nature, arising out of the Enlightenment, according to which humans are fundamentally good (and problems arise only because of societal incivilities). However, upon further reflection, I now realize that measuring and comparing people’s conceptions of human nature in a postmodern, secular age requires a response option of “neither good nor sinful.” The “new atheism,” for instance, is rooted in a materialist naturalism that finds no ultimate meaning in terms like goodness and sinfulness. How is a materialist, or a religious person whose views have been influenced by materialism, to respond to a survey question about human nature when the only possible answers are “basically good,” “basically sinful,” or “both good and sinful”?

Another potentially useful addition to a survey on human nature would be a measure of the robustness of respondents’ sense of sin. In A Secular Age, Charles Taylor discusses the loss of sin from the social imaginary by emphasizing the role that communal practices play in shaping the imagination. As the thick communal practices surrounding sinfulness in human life have eroded in an era in which being entirely non-religious is a real option, we are left with increasingly thin views of sin. Thus, his approach emphasizes the flipside of the interchange between views of human nature and sacramental practice that I highlighted earlier. For Taylor, declining sacramental practices are necessarily impacting the social imagination. Even if younger Catholics have an understanding of the concept of sinfulness, their lack of engagement in robust communal practices surrounding sinfulness means that their ultimate social understanding of this concept is likely to be rather hollow.
At least one additional limitation to this research arises from this insight. The current research fails to access the rich metaphors used within Christianity to discuss human nature and original sin—for instance, depictions of original sin as a wound inflicted on human nature, or human nature understood as a painting in need of restoration. What metaphors do ordinary Catholics use most often in discussing sinfulness and goodness? More fully exploring this topic may require in-depth interviews, in which we allow people to articulate their own views and explore which metaphors they use and how they use them. While this study pushes the discussion forward, we must recognize the limitations inherent in the questions respondents were asked (and in the responses they were allowed to choose). In the future, social scientists should engage the expertise of theologians in articulating various conceptualizations of human nature and in identifying the important distinctions between them. Even so, sociologists will still need to be creative in developing ways to accurately measure the views of ordinary Americans.

In conclusion, this study illustrates a consistent distinctiveness in Catholics’ understanding of human nature, but a distinctiveness that is formed within a larger culture and is affected by societal shifts. Catholics, even with their consistently more optimistic outlook, have not been insulated from a larger cultural shift within the US toward greater ambivalence about the nature of humanity. This larger cultural shift has potentially important implications for the sacramental life of the Church, but further research is needed to clarify this shift and verify its proper interpretation.

END NOTES


2 The multinomial logistic regression model analyzes 663 Catholics (I dropped Catholic respondents with missing data on any of the variables). In order to maximize cases, I include respondents who volunteered an alternative identification (combined as “other Catholic”) and those who respond “I don’t know” when asked what type of Catholic they were in the regression but included multiple dummy variables to indicate each of these responses.

3 More recently, he has also written about the emergence of millennial Catholics born in the 1980s and 1990s. Since our data include only a handful of millennial Catholics (few of them had reached age 18 by 2002), I include them as part of the post-Vatican II generation in my analyses.

4 These multinomial logistic regressions analyzed 1,965 cases rather than just 663, and I modeled generational differences among Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, and Catholics. The analyses control for respondents’ level of education, income, work status, marital status, number of children, and religious service attendance, and in the case of religious-service attendance, I include an interaction term of religious tradition by religious attendance. This feature accounts for how religious-service attendance affects Mainline and Evangelical Protestants differently than it affects Catholics, a difference I already highlighted in this report. Whereas greater attendance makes Mainline and Evangelical Protestants less likely to call human nature “basically good,” it makes Catholics slightly more likely to do so. Inclusion of these interaction terms parameterizes this reality. Indeed, the effect of the interaction of attendance by Catholic is statistically significant in our model. Similarly, in exploring generation, I include an interaction term of religious tradition by generation in order to allow the effects of generations to differ across religious traditions.

5 Demographers usually identify those born between 1945 and 1964 as the Baby Boom generation. Here, I shift those years slightly for consistency with my earlier models, which identified the Vatican II generation as born between 1941 and 1960.

6 Since all of the interaction effects of religious tradition by generation were insignificant in the model used to create Figures 7–9, I created a final model in which I removed these interaction effects and parameterized generation as decade of birth. This model, a more fine-grained look at differences by year of birth, is used to calculate the likelihood of viewing human nature as “basically good” by decade of birth among Catholics, Evangelical Protestants, and Mainline Protestants.
CATHOLIC SOCIAL & PASTORAL RESEARCH INITIATIVE

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CSPRI RESOURCE FOR GUIDING DISCUSSIONS ON CATHOLICISM AND HUMAN NATURE

SARAH MORAN AND BRIAN STARKS

INTRODUCTION

This supplement aims to provide resources for generating rich conversations about Catholicism and human nature. Faith formation and evangelization are always linked to an individual’s experience of God and others, and this resource provides reflections on Christian theology and personal experiences, as both form our understandings when it comes to such questions as: What constitutes a human person? What does it mean to affirm that humans are free beings? Why is the perception of human nature shifting among younger Catholics? • Do younger Catholics uniquely feel disillusioned with the state of the world? • How does today’s unprecedented global interrelatedness affect them? • How do young Catholics interact with popular culture? • How has the theological formation of Catholic youth differed from that of older Catholics? • What elements of the Church’s sacramental life and material culture characterize this generation’s Catholic experience? • How are the moral issues facing youth different from older Catholics? Which lifestyle decisions among their peers might make them more aware of human sinfulness?

HUMAN NATURE AND YOUNGER CATHOLICS

U.S. Catholics understand the relation between human goodness and sinfulness distinctly, being significantly more likely than the U.S. population as a whole to view human nature as “basically good.” But where this distinctiveness comes from, and what it entails, is less clear. How much is a rich understanding of Church teaching informing respondents’ answers? What about their personal experience of Catholic culture? Of family and professional life? Of wider American and global culture?

Despite the generally positive view of human nature among Catholics, we find views of human nature are shifting among younger Catholics from “basically good” to “both good and sinful.” This finding is illuminating, and perhaps even surprising, for those involved in pastoral ministry to youth. A major concern of youth ministry today is the interconnected problem of the secularization of culture and moral relativism confronting young people, which Pope Benedict XVI identified as one of the greatest problems of our time.2 Importantly, this survey suggests that one impact of secularization, especially on younger generations, has been an unexpected, even counterintuitive one: younger generations appear to be more sensitive to the reality of human sinfulness than their older Catholic counterparts.

One way to interpret the three responses is to visualize a single continuum, on which respondents placed a mental marker somewhere between “basically sinful” and “basically good.” Such a continuum structure suggests a “zero-sum” relationship between human goodness and sinfulness. If human beings are 100 percent good, they must be 0 percent sinful. If they are 80 percent sinful, they must only be 20 percent good. Or perhaps human beings are exactly half good and half sinful.

In this interpretation, a response of “both good and sinful” is indicative of less goodness and more sinfulness than a “basically good” response.

A SINGLE CONTINUUM OF HUMAN NATURE

BASICALLY SINFUL     BOTH GOOD AND SINFUL     BASICALLY GOOD

Another way to visualize responses is to use an image of four quadrants, created by two dimensions of human nature—the dimensions of sinfulness and goodness. As we move from left to right along the horizontal axis, an individual’s conception of human goodness increases in strength. Similarly, as we move upward along the vertical axis, an individual’s conception of human sinfulness increases in strength. This two-dimensional image allows for a more expansive field on which to plot respondents’ views. It also allows us to distinguish between two different types of “both good and sinful” responses. On the one hand, the “both good and sinful” quadrant on the bottom left allows us to plot various “weak” views of both human goodness and sinfulness, such as a resigned view of human behavior. Indeed, the bottom left corner could even accommodate naturalistic accounts of human nature that consider human beings as neither good nor sinful, but simply as rationally self-interested and self-preserving.

In contrast to the single continuum model, one need not diminish one’s view of human goodness in order to account for human sinfulness in this model.

But which quadrant or what point on the continuum best reflects Catholic teaching on human nature? While the scope of this supplement does not permit a detailed consideration of its history, a brief exploration of classical Catholic reflection on human beings in relation to God and creation, a field known as theological anthropology, may be helpful in answering this question.

CATHOLIC TEACHINGS ON HUMAN NATURE

In Genesis, human beings, along with the rest of creation, are affirmed as “very good” (Gen. 1:31). What is more, they are the only creatures described as fashioned image Dei (“in the image of God,” Gen. 1:27). This image Dei teaching serves as the foundation of Catholic teaching on human nature, which continually affirms the intrinsic goodness of a humanity that images a God who is Love (1 John 4:8).

Despite humanity’s intrinsic goodness and orientation toward God’s will, Catholic teaching holds that the Fall of our first parents fundamentally wounded human nature (Gen. 38), causing “a deprivation of original holiness and justice,” as the report’s epigraph reminds (CCC 405). Onto a “very good” creation came a certain “captivity under the power of evil, original sin (CCC 407).

In reviewing the report’s findings, you may have recognized that people can conceive of the relationship between goodness and sinfulness in the human person in different ways. For example, two people who respond that human nature is “both good and sinful” can have different understandings of what this response means. A brief analysis of two models for interpreting the three response options to the RAPAS survey question is helpful in highlighting these different conceptions.

A FOUR-QUADRANT DEPICTION OF HUMAN NATURE

Also, inhabitants of the lower right quadrant place a mental marker on the image of four quadrants, created by two dimensions of human nature. In this interpretation, a response of “both good and sinful” indicates a greater degree of goodness and less sinfulness than “basically good.”

What do younger Catholics mean when they respond that human nature is “both good and sinful”? In reviewing the report’s findings, you may have recognized that people can conceive of the relationship between goodness and sinfulness in the human person in different ways. For example, two people who respond that human nature is “both good and sinful” can have different understandings of what this response means. A brief analysis of two models for interpreting the three response options to the RAPAS survey question is helpful in highlighting these different conceptions.

A SINGLE CONTINUUM OF HUMAN NATURE

BASICALLY SINFUL     BOTH GOOD AND SINFUL     BASICALLY GOOD

Another way to visualize responses is to use an image of four quadrants, created by two dimensions of human nature—the dimensions of sinfulness and goodness. As we move from left to right along the horizontal axis, an individual’s conception of human goodness increases in strength. Similarly, as we move upward along the vertical axis, an individual’s conception of human sinfulness increases in strength. This two-dimensional image allows for a more expansive field on which to plot respondents’ views. It also allows us to distinguish between two different types of “both good and sinful” responses. On the one hand, the “both good and sinful” quadrant on the bottom left allows us to plot various “weak” views of both human goodness and sinfulness, such as a resigned view of human behavior. Indeed, the bottom left corner could even accommodate naturalistic accounts of human nature that consider human beings as neither good nor sinful, but simply as rationally self-interested and self-preserving.

In contrast to the single continuum model, one need not diminish one’s view of human goodness in order to account for human sinfulness in this model.

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While St. Augustine suggested that original sin’s effects were so great that, without grace, a person is unable to choose the good, St. Thomas Aquinas described it as the soul’s tendency to choose lesser goods over the greater good of obedience to God. Catholic thought after the Protestant Reformation paired St. Augustine’s theological anthropology with that of St. Thomas Aquinas. On the one hand, the Church affirms that the grace of God is always at work in the moral life. Yet it rejects the idea that humans are intrinsically evil apart from grace or predestined to behave either sinfully or morally. Rather, even after the Fall, human beings still reflect the innate goodness of their creation and retain free will to act in ways that have a genuine moral value.

While the doctrine of original sin deeply informs a Catholic understanding of human nature, the image Dei remains its pivot point. Precisely by creating human beings free, God enables the human person to “participate in the wisdom and goodness of the Creator who gives him mastery over his acts and the ability to govern himself with a view to the true and the good” (CCC 1954). The innate knowledge of good and evil inscribed in every human heart, referred to as the “natural law” by scholastics, prompts us to choose the greater good of God’s will rather than the lesser good of our own desires (CCC 1956).

Importantly, only through divine revelation, in scripture, tradition, and most centrally, in the Person of Christ, can the human being directed to holiness, ultimate fulfillment, and salvation. Yet even in her growth in holiness, the human person must actively cooperate with grace, as seen most poignantly in the “fiat” of the Blessed Mother (Luke 1:38).

**Visualizing a Catholic Theological Anthropology**

As we see, Catholicism provides us with a strong sense of human goodness, that human beings are “fearfully, wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). Yet it does not obscure the reality that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and stand in need of reconciliation and redemption. Catholic theological anthropology, then, pushes us toward a strong view of both human goodness and the reality of sinfulness.

In light of Catholic theological anthropology, a single continuum view of responses to our survey question appears problematic. It seems impossible to place a Catholic account of human goodness and sinfulness on such a continuum, as the Catholic account does not take the form of a “zero-sum” relationship but rather pushes towards a stronger view of both goodness and sinfulness.

Given the limitations of a single continuum for interpreting Catholic responses, the image of four quadrants, encompassing two dimensions of human nature, is perhaps more helpful as it allows us to envision a “both good and sinful” response that stems from a deep belief in the innate goodness of humanity coupled with a robust sense of the reality of sin. The four-quadrant approach also highlights the fact that some “both good and sinful” responses may be coming from the bottom-left quadrant, rather than the top-right. Some respondents may have felt apathetic toward or disillusioned by human behavior, such that their selection of “both good and sinful” indicates a resignation toward what they see around them, or a naturalistic account of human beings, really more accurately described as “neither good, nor sinful,” but simply rational and self-preserving. Rather than seeing humanity as “fearfully, wonderfully made,” yet in need of grace and redemption, they may simply see people engaging in some behaviors that they find as good and some that they label as bad. In this case, rather than expressing a strong conviction about innate human goodness and sinfulness, this response, while using the same words, signifies a resigned or naturalistic view of human behavior, not an intensely Catholic one.

While few Protestants, and even fewer Catholics, found “basically sinful” to best reflect their view of human beings, we may ask whether a well-formed Catholic respondent could not answer “basically good” or “both good and sinful” in light of a Catholic theological anthropology. As such, we encourage you to consider not only how you would answer this question, but whether posing this question to those with whom you share the faith could provide the starting point for a rich conversation about Catholic teaching. While the graphic tool of the four quadrants may be helpful in this discussion, especially with youth, we invite you also to consider how the heart of Christian hope, the incarnation of Jesus Christ and reconciliation of the world through Him, begs the question whether even this image fails to do justice to the radical way in which communion with Christ and the hope of the resurrection fundamentally remake humanity.

**Moving Forward**

This supplement has highlighted the problem of viewing human nature on a single continuum between “basically sinful” and “basically good.” In pastoral ministry, then, our catechesis should address the question of whether some presentations of human nature as created image Dei obscure the reality of sin. While the response “basically good” captures well a Catholic theological anthropology, our faith also teaches us of the Fall of humanity, and that God reveals the truth of God’s will for the human existence most fully through the incarnation of Christ (John 1:14).

The incarnation is the ultimate revelation of God’s love for the world. But it also points to the fact that human beings were in need of God’s action of reconciliation, having turned away from God, a situation humanity could not rectify alone, without Jesus’s life, death and resurrection.

On the other hand, our pastoral ministry should also address the question of whether some presentations of human nature as fallen and sinful obscure the inherent goodness of creation (Gen. 2:30). The very freedom God granted to humanity, by which humanity broke full communion with God, is fundamental to the unique place of the human being in all of creation as created image Dei. Through Jesus Christ, by whom the creature is reconciled with the Creator and made new, God extends an eternal “Yes!” to creation. Through cooperation with grace, humanity has the opportunity to enter into God’s “Yes!” in the present and in eternity.1

In general, this data should be encouraging. American Catholics appear to understand important features of a Catholic account of creation, sin, grace, and redemption. The fact that Catholics who attend Mass more often are more likely to identify people as “basically good” suggests that a positive Catholic theological anthropology, with the image Dei as its pivot point, is soaking in—through homilies, catechesis, classroom teaching, Catholic media and parish life. Of course, because of the various limitations of the survey data, additional reflection is needed by pastoral workers in considering the report’s pastoral implications for their particular context and ministry.

**Responding to the Generational Shift in Views of Human Nature**

It is unclear from this report whether younger generations of Catholics (who are most likely to select “both good and sinful”) have a weak or a strong conception of human sinfulness and goodness. Engaging youth who are less convinced of the existence of these realities requires distinct pastoral strategies from engaging those who have a deep sense of both human sinfulness and goodness. For example, a youth minister splitting time between two local parishes may pose the question about human nature to teens at each parish and find that “both good and sinful” is the commonest answer in both settings. However, he/she must take further steps, and craft a unique pedagogical strategy and discipleship plan, if further discussion surfaces that one group of teens is less convinced of the realities of human goodness and sinfulness—perhaps displaying a certain moral relativism or apathy about human nature—while the other group displays a robust sense of both human sinfulness and goodness.

In any case, pastors, youth ministers, and teachers should be aware that today’s youth appear to have a stronger sense of human sinfulness than older generations. This may call for a re-evaluation of how we approach preaching to, and discipleship...
of, young people. At the very least, it suggests the need for further conversation with them about what they really believe about human nature.

Relatedly, while common opinion may suppose that older Catholics generally hold a gloomier view of humanity than their younger counterparts, due perhaps to their greater life experience and traditional values, this report’s findings indicates the opposite. According to this data, older Catholics are more likely than young Catholics to identify human beings as “basically good.” In parish ministry, then, there is also room for renewed conversation with older Catholics about what they understand about human nature.

Such a conversation may open up fruitful dialogue about living the vocations of parenthood and grandparenthood, as well as Christian discipleship more broadly, in the later years of life.

On the whole, one of the primary significances of this report may be the imperative, in situations of ministry and instruction, to ask of participants of all ages the following questions:

• How do you understand human nature?
• How does your personal experience both inside and outside the Church contribute to your understanding of the human person in relation to God and creation?
• What biblical and theological terms, metaphors and images do we use as Catholics to describe God? Human beings? Sin? Redemption?

We hope this supplement can provide food for thought and a starting point for this important conversation with those among whom you share the faith.

END NOTES

1 In his apostolic letter Ubi Caritas et Amor, Pope Benedict describes that “to proclaim fruitfully the Word of the Gospel one is first asked to have a profound experience of God.” In Deus Caritas Est, he writes “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (n. 1).

