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the Church's Pro-Life Teachings:
A Bellwether for the Church's Political Strategy?

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Abstract

The current study seeks to examine what Catholic young adults think about the Roman Catholic Church's pro-life teachings and how their attitudes toward these teachings could inform the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' strategy for politically engaging this constituency. In the fall 2013 semester, I conducted four focus group sessions at a midsize Catholic university in the northeastern United States. Each focus group lasted about one hour, and participants were recruited via snowball sampling. At each focus group session, the participants were asked a series of questions related to their knowledge of and attitudes toward the Church's pro-life teachings. The results fell into three main categories: their feelings about the pro-life movement; their feelings about the Catholic Church and what they, as Catholic young adults, want from the Church; and the potential of Pope Francis to influence them to alter their feelings toward the Church.

The terms *pro-life* and *pro-life movement* have, for better or worse, become intimately connected with the Roman Catholic Church and its episcopal leadership even though pro-life sentiment is shared across a swath of religious traditions (Kelly 1988, 1990b). The terms *pro-life* and *pro-life movement* have also become synonymous with abortion, even though issues such as capital punishment, HIV/AIDS, war, and nuclear proliferation have been discussed in the literature under the umbrella of pro-life (Bernardin 1983; Bjarnason and Welch 2004; Kelly 1987). Extant literature questions whether individuals who oppose abortion actually practice a “consistent ethic of life” as articulated by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and later adopted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (Bernardin 1983; Kelly 1999a). In this article, I examine what Catholic young adults think about the Roman Catholic Church’s pro-life teachings and how their attitudes toward these teachings could inform the strategy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) for engaging this constituency politically. Engaging young adults politically and in other ways is essential for ensuring the future vitality of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States.

In December 1983, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin delivered the annual Gannon Lecture at Fordham University in New York City. On this occasion, he famously reflected on the USCCB’s pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace* (1983) by using nonviolence to draw a line connecting war, nuclear proliferation, and abortion to call for a “consistent ethic of life” (Bernardin 1983: 4). In discussing the challenges and opportunities that are present in developing a consistent ethic of life, Bernardin said (1983: 4), “The shaping of a consensus in the Church must be joined to the larger task of sharing our vision with the wider society. Here two questions face us: the substance of our position and the style of our presence in the policy debate.” In the 2012 election cycle, the USCCB went to great lengths to influence voters to vote against certain candidates, such as President Obama, as well as to vote the Church’s position on same-sex marriage referenda in the states of Maine, Maryland, and Washington. President Obama was reelected, and voters in the three aforementioned states voted to legalize same-sex marriage, while voters in Minnesota rejected a ballot measure that would have defined marriage as between one man and one woman. In short, the bishops’ position was unequivocally rejected by the electorate. Some bishops have responded with harsh tactics, such as refusing Holy Communion to politicians and voters whose positions differ from their own, in addition to using inflammatory rhetoric including an increasingly pervasive claim that government is intentionally quashing religious liberty (*Commonweal* 2011, 2012; Galston 2012; Millette 2011). This is not in keeping with Cardinal Bernardin’s call to “maintain our civil courtesy” (Bernardin 1983: 4). Specifically, Bernardin said,

In the public policy exchange, substance and style are closely related. The issues of war, abortion, and capital punishment are emotional and often divisive questions. As we seek to shape and share the vision of a consistent ethic of life, I suggest a style governed by the following rule: We should maintain and clearly articulate our religious convictions but also maintain our civil courtesy. We should be vigorous in stating a case and attentive in hearing another's case; we should test everyone's logic but not question his or her motive.

What we have seen from the bishops in political discourse and public policy of late raises the question: Has Cardinal Bernardin's call for engaging others on pro-life issues been lost? If so, what is the implication of this loss? The current study, which is exploratory by design, hypothesizes that Cardinal Bernardin's appeal has indeed been lost. The implications of this loss are not only that the bishops are failing to actively engage young adults, but also that the bishops' actions are actively pushing even farther from the Church a constituency that already feels disenfranchised, and this could threaten the growth and vitality of the Church for a generation. To address this research question, I will examine the relevant extant literature, explicate the methodology employed in the study, and engage in a discussion of the results, including what further research is needed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of social issues have been discussed in the literature under the umbrella term *pro-life*. While many relevant studies do not use the term *pro-life* per se, their subject matter is germane to the current discussion. A plethora of these studies involved issues surrounding sexuality, including the impact of religion and religiosity on behaviors and attitudes involving abortion (Adamczyk 2007, 2009; King, Myers, and Byrne 1992; Stone and Waszak 1992; Tomal 2000, 2001). Several of these studies indicate that religiosity does not affect abortion rates (Adamczyk 2007, 2009; Ovadia and Moore 2010), while King, Myers, and Byrne (1992) found that religiosity does affect attitudes toward abortion. In terms of religious affiliation, conservative Protestants were less likely to obtain abortions than were women of other religious traditions, including Catholicism, mainline Protestantism, and non-Christian traditions (Adamczyk 2009; Ovadia and Moore 2010). Many of the adolescents in Stone and Waszak's (1992) study held erroneous beliefs about abortion that were influenced primarily by conservative morality and religious beliefs. While the student participants in their study indicated their personal opposition to abortion, they claimed to support its legality. Yet the teenagers in that study had almost no factual knowledge about abortion; instead, they relied on anecdotal evidence about abortion's legality and regulation. The participants' staggering ignorance about abortion indicates a need for the availability of basic information.

Other studies related to sexuality focused on contraception, disparities in access to reproductive health care, and teen childbearing. In considering the impact of both race and religion on contraceptive use among adolescent females, research has shown that religious affiliation does affect adolescents' likelihood of being sexually active (Brewster et al. 1998). Both black and white fundamentalist Christian adolescents are less likely to engage in sexual activity than are their nonfundamentalist counterparts. For those who do engage in sexual activity, "both Black and White fundamentalists are less likely than other young women to practice contraception" (Brewster et al. 1998: 502).

Despite the efforts of numerous religious groups to stymie premarital sexual activity, especially among teenagers, half of female adolescents in the United States have engaged in sexual intercourse by the age of seventeen (Ely and Dulmus 2010). Yet they do not have the same access to reproductive health care as do their sexually active counterparts who are age 18 and older. This age-based disparity, which includes unequal access to over-the-counter emergency contraceptives, abortion, and human papillomavirus vaccinations, exists despite any racially or socioeconomically based privilege a young woman may have. This disparity in access can be linked to legislation requiring parental involvement in teens' reproductive health care decisions. These laws "appear to reduce adolescent abortion rates by 18%" (Ely and Dulmus 2010: 344).

Studies focusing on childbirth among adolescents have considered the effects of parental involvement laws and religiosity on teens' decisions to continue pregnancy. Between 1994 and 2001, "abortion rates for adolescents decreased while birth rates increased, although the unplanned pregnancy rates for women age 19 and younger decreased overall" (Finer and Henshaw 2006 in Ely and Dulmus 2010: 344). Consequently, the birthrate among adolescents in the United States is higher than that in many other industrialized nations (Ovadia and Moore 2010). This disparity between the United States and its industrialized counterparts can be linked to religiosity, as "counties [in the United States] with more evangelical Protestants have significantly higher teen birthrates (as predicted), but counties with higher proportions of Catholics have significantly lower teen birth rates" (Ovadia and Moore 2010: 327). These two factors converge, as parental involvement laws and religious membership were negatively correlated to abortion rates and both religiosity and parental involvement laws influenced abortion decisions; therefore parental involvement laws alone cannot be credited for decreasing abortion rates (Tomal 2000, 2001).

Other than issues related to sexuality, the death penalty is the pro-life issue that is most frequently considered in the literature. Regarding capital punishment, extant studies have taken into account the presence of consistent attitudes across a number of pro-life-related issues, attitudinal differences between high school and college students, race and religiosity, and Catholic young adults' personal affinity

for the Pope (Bjarnason and Welch 2004; Crain and Lester 2000; Lester and Maggioncalda-Aretz 1997; Mulligan 2006). There was an absence of association between high school students' attitudes toward abortion, capital punishment, and suicide; thus a consistent pro-life ethic did not exist. High school students rated more acts as worthy of the death penalty than did college students, suggesting that "adolescents become less punitive after some college experience or that the more punitive high school students are less likely to go to college" (Lester and Maggioncalda-Aretz 1997: 447). After testing for extraversion and neuroticism, this study also concluded that personality and gender were not associated with attitudes about the death penalty.

Race and religiosity were found to determine the presence or absence of support for the death penalty (Bjarnason and Welch 2004). Additionally, Pope John Paul II was seen to have an influence on Catholics' attitudes toward the death penalty and abortion. Catholics who viewed John Paul II favorably were more likely to condemn the death penalty and abortion; therefore it can be inferred that during John Paul II's papacy, he influenced Catholics' beliefs and political ideologies (Mulligan 2006). Although it remains unclear just how much influence he had, this finding "may have consequences not only for Catholics but for American politics," given that Roman Catholics comprise one quarter of the U.S. electorate (Mulligan 2006: 739). While Pope John Paul II was found to have an influence on Catholics' attitudes toward the death penalty, Bjarnason and Welch (2004) found that Catholics' support of capital punishment does not differ significantly from that of non-Catholics in the general U.S. population. Yet a number of social factors were found to influence Catholics' support for capital punishment when compared to other Catholics. According to Bjarnason and Welch (2004: 115), "African-American, female, and unmarried parishioners are less supportive of the death penalty than their white, male, and married counterparts, and support for the death penalty decreases with advancing age and higher levels of education."

With the exception of Bjarnason and Welch's (2004) study, the works cited above do not use the term *pro-life* or *pro-life movement* even when Catholics were a focus of the study. These studies concentrate on attitudes and beliefs related to pro-life topics without addressing "pro-life" as a social movement. In contrast, the work of Staggenborg (1986, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1991, 1993) looks at abortion through the lens of social movement theory while focusing primarily on the pro-choice movement. Some of Staggenborg's work (Meyer and Staggenborg 2008; Staggenborg 1987) is germane to the current analysis because of its focus on differences in strategy between the pro-choice and pro-life movements. However, there are a number of studies that specifically examine "pro-life" as a social movement. Relevant studies focusing on the pro-life movement include examinations of political actions (Maxwell and Jelen 1996; Raymond and Norrander 1990; Tamney, Johnson, and Burton 1992), a reframing of pro-life discourse

(Trumpy 2014), and the impact of public assistance policies on abortion decisions (Hussey 2011).

Maxwell and Jelen (1996) look at the role of a “conviction to pro-life” in participation in direct activism. The authors define a “conviction to pro-life” as a “conversion like experience” that allows pro-life direct activists to “resolve ambiguous understandings and therefore ambivalence toward abortion, social roles, and God’s will regarding participation in activism” (Maxwell and Jelen 1996: 66). The study looks at the motivation behind direct action, either violent or nonviolent, in support the pro-life movement. Raymond and Norrander (1990) focus on the connection between religious affiliation and tolerance of political activism within the pro-life movement, while Tamney, Johnson, and Burton (1992: 32) examine “the cultural or ideological bases of abortion attitudes” among Catholics and conservative Protestants and how those attitudes affected voting decisions.

In addition to the aforementioned studies, there is a wide body of literature in publications geared toward a public intellectual readership, such as *America: The National Catholic Review*, *Commonweal*, and *The Christian Century*, that does not shy away from the terms *pro-life* and *pro-life movement* and all of their social and political ramifications. These articles, particularly the work of sociologist James R. Kelly, discuss not only the attitudes of the American populace toward pro-life issues such as abortion and capital punishment, but also the legal and political implications of the pro-life movement. Since the late 1980s, Kelly’s work has focused on several key themes that can be characterized as a hermeneutic of “a public theology of a consistent ethic of life.” Although Kelly did not use the term *public theology* until his 1998 Presidential Address to the Association for the Sociology of Religion (Kelly 1999a), his work before and after on the pro-life movement seeks to find a common ground where individuals on opposing sides of pro-life issues, particularly abortion, can meet. This hermeneutic of public theology is rooted in the aforementioned consistent ethic of life and includes three broad themes: The pro-life movement concerns more than abortion, the extreme voices on either side of pro-life issues do not represent the majority of popular opinion, and the rights of the unborn must be connected to the rights of women. In describing a public theology, Kelly (1999a: 102) says, “a *public theology* . . . can challenge citizens in terms of their religious commitment in their specific churches and synagogues and now mosques” [emphasis in the original]. He goes on to say that “when the *public church* reflexively examines and critiques existing social practices and cultural understandings in the light of its deepest religious insights into justice and the good society, it does *public theology*” [emphasis in the original]. My study can be used as a lens to examine whether Catholic young adults have a consistent ethic of life and the civil courtesy for which Bernardin called in his 1983 Gannon Lecture and to look for the presence of the type of public theology described by Kelly.

As early as 1987, Kelly wrote about HIV/AIDS, military spending, capital punishment, and “homosexual civil rights” in the context of the pro-life movement while also criticizing the National Right to Life Committee, the leading pro-life activist organization at the time, for being a “single-issue” organization “in that it takes an official position only on the ‘life’ issues of abortion, infanticide and euthanasia” (Kelly 1987: 152). Kelly continued to highlight this point in subsequent work (Kelly 1990b), saying that because government intervention is needed for a variety of pro-life-related social problems, the pro-life movement cannot allow government intervention involving abortion to result in mistrust for government intervention into poverty, inequality, and violence.

In 1988, Kelly wrote that the demise of American Citizens Concerned for Life (ACCL) was symptomatic of larger issues within the pro-life movement. He said that the ACCL took a more nuanced view of anti-abortion advocacy than its sister organization, the National Right to Life Committee. ACCL suggested that ending abortion requires social changes that would result in women no longer feeling that abortion was their only option instead of taking an absolutist position that focuses on political remedies such as a constitutional amendment against abortion. According to Kelly (1988: 710), ACCL’s position was most likely to resonate with liberal Protestant denominations and the “70 percent of the people that don’t get excited [about social movements] one way or the other.” However, ACCL failed to attract this constituency in its thirteen years of existence because “these people are quiet” (Kelly 1988: 710). Over the next twenty years, Kelly continued to write about the silent majority and vocal minority on pro-life issues (Kelly 1989b, 1990b, 1991, 1999a, 2009), particularly how major abortion cases such as the Supreme Court decision in *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* posed an identity crisis for the pro-life movement and the need for the two sides to find common ground. In contrast to Kelly’s argument, Meyer and Staggenborg (2008: 226) say that *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* “ushered in a period of intense conflict between the opposing movements.”

Much of the rhetoric in pro-life public discourse concentrates on the unborn while ignoring the women who face the decision. Even though Kelly gives only passing reference to the unequal burden that unplanned pregnancy places on women in comparison to men (Kelly 1990b), he reiterates multiple times that the rights of the unborn must be connected to the rights of women. Without this connection, women facing the decision of whether or not to terminate their pregnancies, especially poor women, will do so in the belief that they have no other option (Kelly 1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1990a, 1990b, 1999a, 1999b, 2009). Specifically, Kelly (1990b: 695) highlights pro-life organization JUSTLIFE’s “package of eight model bills that together suggest the beginnings of a persuasive pro-life approach in the post *Webster* era.” The themes of these eight model bills recur throughout Kelly’s work, particularly the need to support women—especially

poor women—through job training, education, public assistance programs, and equal pay for equal work.

More recent scholarship (e.g., Hussey 2011; Trumpy 2014) has taken on these concerns by discussing a reframing of pro-life discourse as well as public assistance programs and abortion. Trumpy's study examines efforts of pro-life social actors known as "pro-woman, pro-life" (PWPL) to eliminate preserving the rights of the unborn as the central talking point of the pro-life movement. Instead, these activists seek to reframe the discussion to have the pro-life movement seen as being beneficial to women and advancing gender equality while simultaneously having the pro-choice movement seen as deleterious to women. This reframing of the pro-life movement "can be situated in a growing trend of conservative movement actors more frequently framing issues in terms of the impact they have on women's lives" (Trumpy 2014: 180). The reframing is manifested in laws in nineteen states that oblige abortion clinics to inform women about the psychological harm having an abortion may cause. Thus pro-life actions can be seen as supporting women because these actions do not result in psychological harm. This perspective turns the discussion to the rights of women. However, it does not appeal to the silent majority Kelly discusses; it appeals instead to more conservative voices.

Hussey's work discusses the connection between the availability of public assistance programs and the decision to terminate a pregnancy and found that a connection does exist. The data supporting this connection are "found only in states where public opinion, policy choices, and a scarcity of abortion providers signal a preference for birth over abortion" (Hussey 2011: 99). This study indicates that Kelly's pronouncement that changes in social policies will greatly reduce the incidence of abortion works only in states that have an atmosphere of opposition to abortion in the first place. Thus Kelly's argument is not as feasible as his work would suggest.

METHODOLOGY

In the fall 2013 semester, I entered the field to conduct four focus group sessions. These sessions took place at a midsized, Roman Catholic university in the northeastern United States.

Student Demographics

According to information publicly available from the university's Office of Institutional Research, 4,764 undergraduate day students were enrolled for the fall 2013 semester. Of these, 518 students identified exclusively as members of a racial/ethnic minority group. There were also 91 students who identified as being of two or more races, for a total of 609 undergraduate day students enrolled for the

fall 2013 semester identifying as people of color.¹ A full breakdown of students of color is available in Table 1.

Table 1: Students of Color Enrolled for Fall 2013 Semester

	Number	Percent
Asian/Pacific Islander	130	2.7
Black/African-American	147	3.1
Hispanic	233	4.9
American Indian/Alaska Native	6	0.1
Native Hawaiian	2	0.0
Two or more races	91	1.9
Total	609	12.7

The university's Office of Institutional Research also provides information on gender and religious affiliation. For the fall 2013 semester, 53 percent of full-time undergraduate day students were women, and 47 percent were men; this is in keeping with national trends (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). For the fall 2012 semester, the semester for which the most recent data are available for this university, 81.2 percent of undergraduate day students identified as Roman Catholic. This number represents a marked decrease from 1965, the earliest year for which data are available, when 97 percent of students at the university identified as Roman Catholic. The religious affiliation information is not broken down by race. Consequently, given the scope of the current project, I had no way of ascertaining whether the university's Catholic student population corresponds to national trends in terms of racial and ethnic composition (Gray et al. 2013). Even so, given that more than three quarters of the undergraduate day student population identified as Roman Catholic, this university was an excellent place to conduct research on Catholic young adults' knowledge of and attitudes toward the Church's pro-life teachings.

Focus Groups

Each focus group session lasted about one hour. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling. I e-mailed students whom I knew personally, asking them to participate. I then asked students who agreed to participate whether they knew

¹ For the fall 2013 semester, the university had seventy-eight students whose racial/ethnic identification was unknown and eighty-eight international students. According to the university's Office of Institutional Research, international students are not included in the aforementioned racial/ethnic categories.

other students who might be interested. I then invited those students via e-mail to participate. Twenty of the twenty-one focus group participants were recruited through e-mails sent to students I already knew personally. Over four weeks in September and October 2013, I led four focus group sessions. The first session had six participants, the second session had seven participants, the third session had five participants, and the fourth session had three participants. All sessions were recorded and professionally transcribed.

Of the twenty-one focus group participants, sixteen were seniors at the university and five were juniors. It was not my intention to limit participation to upper-class students. This was most likely an unintended result of the sampling technique, as upper-class students were more likely to be known to me personally because they had been at the university longer. For the same reason, I was more likely to be a known entity to upper-class students and to have “campus credibility”² with them, thus making them more likely to want to attend a focus group session. Seven of the participants were men, and fourteen were women. Again, this was not an intentional sampling distribution; rather, it was a result of the sampling technique used. While the gender distribution of the participants did not exactly reflect the gender composition of the university, it was in keeping with both university and national statistics in that a majority of participants were women. According to the racial/ethnic categories used by the university’s Office of Institutional Research, one of the participants was black/African-American, one participant was Hispanic, and nineteen were white. Consequently, 4.76 percent of participants were black/African-American while 4.76 percent of participants were Hispanic. Taking into consideration the size of the sample, this was in keeping with the racial/ethnic distribution in the university’s undergraduate day division.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At each focus group session, the participants were asked a series of questions designed to determine their knowledge of and attitudes toward the Church’s pro-life teachings. The responses of the focus group participants fall into three main categories: their feelings about the pro-life movement; their feelings about the Roman Catholic Church and what they, as Catholic young adults, want from the Church; and the potential of Pope Francis to influence them to alter their feelings toward the Church.

² By “campus credibility,” I mean that the students know me because they have taken my courses and, consequently, I have earned their trust and a certain level of cachet with them.

Feelings About Pro-Life Issues

When asked what constitutes pro-life issues, the participants overwhelmingly identified abortion as a pro-life issue. Veronica, a senior, said, “the biggest issue is abortion because that’s what everybody focuses on.” Alycia, a junior, said, “Well, when I hear pro-life, I just think anti-abortion. That’s the first thing that comes to my head.” Although other topics such as suicide, contraception, euthanasia, stem cell research, animal rights, the death penalty, murder, and war were mentioned, abortion dominated all four discussions. This point is encapsulated by Nate, a junior who said,

For pro-life, whenever that is even brought up, I only strictly think about abortion because that’s always the main argument about it. I never even thought about suicide. That was just never even brought up to my attention. Whenever someone says “pro-life,” it always goes straight into the abortion argument.

When the conversation turned to war during the first focus group, Lisa, a senior, stated,

An issue that I don’t think a lot of people think of is war. I think war should be a big pro-life issue because if you’re pro-life and against abortion but for war, that doesn’t really make sense to me because you’re killing people rather than a group of cells.

James, also a senior, countered Lisa’s argument:

I think it [pro-life issues] can’t include war under what we know as pro-life because it’s [pro-life issues] giving someone the option to life When it comes to war . . . you’re defending your own rights against something else, so I don’t think pro-life and war can have any connection whatsoever, in my opinion.

During the second focus group, Amy, a senior, said, “Maybe the humane killing of animals [qualifies as a pro-life issue] because . . . an animal has a life as well.” Frank, a senior who participated in the third focus group, took a broader, more holistic view of the meaning of pro-life:

I consider pro-life a sort of a movement . . . of the Church . . . that focuses on preserving and extending the sanctity of human life. So that could engage abortion matters, it could engage euthanasia matters—so from the beginning to the very end of life, and also other matters in between in terms of mental health, physical health, and things like that.

All participants were adamant that abortion was the primary, if not the sole, pro-life issue. However, the participants clearly allowed for some debate about what else might constitute a pro-life issue.

One salient point of debate was on the death penalty. During the first focus group, Veronica flatly said, "I'm pro death penalty." James said, "I'm against it. Absolutely against it." Seamus, a junior said, "For me, the death penalty sort of just reminds me of places we came from that we don't want to go back to." The idea that capital punishment is a quick end instead of a lasting punishment came up several times over the four focus group discussions. James said, "I think if I were to ever kill someone, I'd want the death penalty, so why should I get what I want? I would NOT want to rot in jail for the rest of my life. That is so much worse than the death penalty." This point was reiterated during subsequent focus groups. Julia, a senior, said, "I think people should just rot in a jail cell. I think that's more punishment than killing them." Theresa, also a senior, said, "It's better to have them live with [the crime committed] forever and to be in jail without parole instead of killing them." Two participants, Veronica and Stefania, were quite vocal about their opposition to legalized abortion only to later express their support for capital punishment. This divergent thinking is not in keeping with a consistent ethic of life. Because neither Veronica nor Stefania was actively involved in the Catholic Church, their divergent thinking was also not in keeping with the point made by Kelly and Kudlac (2000) that more involved Catholics were more opposed to the death penalty than were the general public and Protestants.

Similarly, the participants who did not support the death penalty but supported legalized abortion did not practice a consistent ethic of life as articulated by Church teaching. For example, James expressed his clear opposition to capital punishment but took a more nuanced position on abortion: "I do think abortion's wrong, but I'm never going to tell a girl what to do with her body." This sentiment was reiterated by Emma, a senior, during the second focus group: "[N]ot that I think abortion is something I would ever do, but how is the Church going to tell me that my choice, either way, is right or it's wrong." Similarly, Cecelia, a senior, stated her views on abortion during the third focus group: "[Y]ou should have the right to choose, just because it's legal doesn't mean that you have to. So why say that someone else can't just because you don't want to?" This type of "live and let live" attitude was reinforced by two other participants in the third focus group. Charlotte, a junior, said, "I personally would never get an abortion, but I think people should have the right to have an abortion." Alycia, a senior, agreed with Charlotte, saying, "I would never do it, but I think that people have the right to choose for themselves . . . it's just going to kill more people if they have to do it illegally." During the fourth focus group, Christopher, a junior, said, "[A]bortion and pro-life is such a thing where there's so much gray area that you

can't have a strict yes or no policy on that." Theresa, a senior, agreed: "Nothing is clear-cut in this world." Only one participant, Frank, a senior, identified himself as both pro-life and anti-death penalty. Multiple participants identified themselves as pro-choice. The other participants, in keeping with much of what Kelly discusses in his work, were more in the middle. They were personally opposed to abortion but wanted to see it remain legal, thus making them part of the silent majority that Kelly (1988) illuminated in his analysis of ACCL's demise. Their wanting to see abortion remain legal stemmed from a desire not to impose their point of view on others. In addition, they did not want to see women resort to dangerous, illegal abortions for lack of other options.

Feelings About the Roman Catholic Church

Overall, the findings show that Catholic young adults who participated in this exploratory study were extremely disaffected and felt disconnected from the Roman Catholic Church. These feelings were not, as I hypothesized, the result of the institutional Church's stance on current issues such as the Affordable Care Act, religious liberty concerns, or marriage equality or—with the exception of one person—even about the priest sex-abuse scandal. Instead, these feelings stemmed principally from participants' childhood experiences. In particular, the participants felt that Catholicism was something that was forced onto them and that the lessons they received during their early school years on topics such as Adam and Eve and Jesus' ethnic background had to be unlearned in high school and college. Nate said, "in my experience . . . they just hammered religion into us and made it where we just didn't want to hear any more of it. . . . We were forced to do so much. It was almost like I didn't have a choice in how I wanted to believe." He went on to say, "[T]he way I was brought up, they never told us the difference between what probably actually happened or what was probably symbolic." Regarding religion being forced, Seamus said, "It was forced on you. It was something you had to do, and it [religious education classes commonly known as CCD] was like going to another class, and it was the last thing we wanted to do." Veronica went on to say, "I think a lot of the disconnect for a lot of people comes from the fact that you're born into a family that's Catholic or Baptist or Muslim or whatever, and that's it. That's what you are. You don't really have a choice until you're older." When the conversation turned to Jesus' ethnic background, seeing Jesus being depicted as a white European only to learn later of his Middle Eastern origins was another source of disaffection. Tom, a senior, said, "He [Jesus] looks like he could be in an Abercrombie and Fitch catalog!" For one participant, Fiona, it is possible that her disaffection was rooted in the experiences her great-grandmother had after arriving in the United States. During the third focus group, Fiona said, "My great-grandmother, who came over from Italy, when she came

here [to the United States], the Catholics turned her away and the Baptists took her in . . . so she decided to forgo the Catholic Church.” As we can see, the exact sources of disaffection varied from family members' experiences to an aversion to religious education classes to not having a choice in one's religious upbringing. Nevertheless, the subsequent feelings were quite strong.

This disaffection seeped into other aspects of the focus group participants' lives as Roman Catholics. In particular, several of them came to view attending Mass as a punishment. Nate, said, “[I]n ninth grade, I was caught smoking weed, and my mom was yelling at me, and in midconversation, she goes ‘And you're going to church tomorrow!’ I thought, ‘This is a punishment now.’” Veronica responded: “I've done worse things. But it was like ‘if you don't go to church, you're going to be punished, and if you do something bad, you need to go to church to be punished.’” For a number of the participants, this disaffection manifested itself most clearly in Mass attendance. The participants were asked to categorize their relationship with the Church. During the third focus group, Charlotte said, “I'm on hiatus.” Other participants said that they had a “distant” relationship with the Church. Alycia elaborated on this point: “Yes, I would say distant. . . . [I]n the past five years, the only time I've been to church was a graduation or a funeral. I have no interest in going, because I don't feel like I get anything out of going to church. It's more boring than anything to me.” During the first focus group, Tom had touched on this point, saying, “[C]hurch can be really boring, especially the churches that I've been to with the priests that just friggin' drone on and on and you're chanting crap that you don't really understand.”

Two participants said specifically that they did not feel connected to the Church at all. During the first focus group, Seamus said, “I don't really have a connection with the church at all at this point in my life besides the fact that I go to a Catholic university. But I don't know how much of a connection that is.” In response, Lisa said, “I don't feel disconnected. I have no connection with the Catholic Church, but I don't feel disconnected from it because I'm not connected to it by my own decision.” These responses indicate the absence of a connection with the Church that far outweighed that of other respondents.

Ultimately, even despite their disaffection, what these Catholic young adults wanted was a Church that would listen to them. When asked how the Roman Catholic Church could communicate with them, all participants agreed that social media was an effective tool for reaching them and others in their age group. The participants also discussed how best to move beyond the brief snippets of information that can be found on Twitter or Facebook. The participants believed that communication is essential, they wanted a Church that will take them and their ideas seriously, and they believed that a focus group style conversation would be a productive way to accomplish this. Nate said, “This kind of situation [focus group discussion] would be awesome.” James agreed, saying, “Yeah . . . open de-

bate and conversation is needed.” Frank said, “We need dialogue. You need informed dialogue, in particular.” These statements expressed a willingness for direct interaction with Church leadership so that people can be heard rather than simply having ideas dictated to them. Not long after the focus group sessions were held, the Vatican directed national bishops’ conferences around the world to make a questionnaire available “immediately [and] as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received” in advance of the 2014 Synod on the Family (McElwee 2013: 1). This type of input from the faithful is another example of the kind of direct participation the focus group participants desired.

Scholars (Bjarnason and Welch 2004; Kelly 1987, 1989b, 1990b) maintain that the pro-life movement is not strictly an anti-abortion movement. Yet without exception, that is precisely what the focus group participants understood it to be. Despite the discussion of the topics under the “pro-life” umbrella, the principal message these participants had received was that Church teachings indicate that “pro-life” equals abortion. Other scholars who have specifically examined the pro-life movement (Hussey 2011; Maxwell and Jelen 1996; Raymond and Norrander 1990; Tamney, Johnson, and Burton 1992; Trumpy 2014) have done so within the context of abortion. Although Kelly maintains that the pro-life movement is and must be about more than abortion, much of his pro-life writing centers on abortion. This dichotomy in the literature exemplifies why the focus group participants believed that the pro-life movement is solely about abortion.

When asked where they learned about pro-life issues, the study participants made no mention of either specific Church documents, such as *The Challenge of Peace* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 1983) and *On Humanae Vitae* (Pope Paul IV 1968), or statements of individuals such as Cardinal Bernardin that are related to pro-life issues. I did not ask the participants specifically whether they were familiar with these documents because I did not want to lead the discussion in a particular direction. Rather, I wanted the discussion to develop from the participants’ knowledge and ideas. In addition, when Cardinal Bernardin died in 1996, the participants were small children, no more than four years old. Consequently, it makes sense that they were not familiar with him or his efforts to broaden the discussion of pro-life issues. The more troubling question is why his brother bishops in the USCCB are not more focused on broadening the pro-life conversation in the way that Cardinal Bernardin envisioned and on finding ways to reach this constituency.

Pope Francis’s Influence

Since Pope Francis was elected to the papacy in 2013, he has inspired an excitement and enthusiasm about the Church among the faithful, especially young

adults (Murphy-Gill 2013). The participants in this study were no different. There was much discussion about Pope Francis, his emphasis on humility, and embracing his vision for the Church. When participants were asked specifically about being disaffected and feeling disconnected from the Church during the first focus group, all of them said, "Yes." When pressed, James elaborated, saying, "Yes. But not with this new pope. I like how the new pope says gays are welcome." Nate reiterated this point: "I love the fact that the new pope has said it's OK to accept gay people. I just hate the fact that now people are like 'He says it's OK. So it's OK now, guys!' Yeah, we needed him to say that, but at the same time, we should not have needed him to say that."

Pope Francis's potential for mitigating the disaffection these Catholic young adults feel came up multiple times. During the first focus group, Nate said, "I just like the fact that he's making [the Church] more open minded. It was time for new ideas to be thrown around, and this new pope, he's doing that and it's given me a more open mind to kind of come back and check out the religion again." This theme continued in the second focus group when Julia said, "I'm all for gay rights. . . . [T]he fact the he came out said what he did about gays was kind of a big deal for me because of a struggle that I have with the Catholic Church right now." The "Pope Francis effect" is still in its nascent stage; he was elected less than a year before the focus groups were conducted. Therefore, the full impact of his papacy remains to be seen. Nevertheless, it is clear that the disaffection that has lingered so long with these young adults was not so entrenched as to make a reconnection with the Church impossible.

The Catholic young adults in my study generally supported legalized abortion, whether or not they supported it personally. This position showed that they did not employ a consistent ethic of life as outlined by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. However, they were eager to engage in the type of civil courtesy Cardinal Bernardin called for in his 1983 Gannon Lecture at Fordham University. They wanted to engage in meaningful dialogue around the issues facing the Roman Catholic Church. Yet they felt more connected to a pontiff thousands of miles away than to their local episcopal leadership. A continued dialogue will, as Kelly (1999a: 102) says, "challenge citizens in terms of their specific churches, synagogues, and mosques."

CONCLUSION

Nationally, Catholics make up one quarter of the U.S. electorate, so it makes sense that the Church's leadership would want to influence Roman Catholics' votes (Pew Research Center 2013). Given the results of the 2012 election, including President Obama's winning the majority of the Catholic vote, it is clear that the Church's efforts to guide its members politically are not achieving the desired

results. The focus groups I conducted show clearly that the current strategy is not having the desired impact on young adults.

This study was small and exploratory in nature. Yet the results show that there is enough substantive information to make a larger, more comprehensive study worthwhile. More focus groups conducted in different parts of the country would expand the scope of the results and control for any regional differences that may exist across the country. Additional focus group sessions will also highlight any gender differences that were not manifested in the current sample size. As was stated previously, I did not ask the participants about their level of familiarity with Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the consistent ethic of life, or documents specifically associated with the Roman Catholic Church's stance on pro-life issues. In future focus groups, I will make direct mention of these topics to ascertain the participants' level of knowledge in these areas. As a whole, the results of the current study are not focused on broader cultural or institutional patterns. Instead, the respondents gave more individualistic responses that are appropriate given their age group and the thought processes our culture encourages. Nevertheless, the responses could be described as "unsociological." Future focus groups should push for a specific discussion of cultural and institutional patterns.

I found that the disconnection the study participants felt from the Roman Catholic Church was graver than I originally hypothesized. The situation is graver because the disconnection felt by the young adults in this study began far earlier than was originally hypothesized. This disconnection did not begin with the recent rhetoric concerning the Affordable Care Act or religious liberty. Rather, it began when many of the study participants were young children. Consequently, they had not given much credence at all to the recent rhetoric from the USCCB. Yet all is not lost. The young adults in this study wanted to be heard and implored their Church to listen to them. The fact that they chose to participate in this study indicates that they were interested and had not completely given up on the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church needs to hear from its young adult constituency if it is to avoid losing them altogether.

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