

A Summary of The New Faithful: Why Young Adults are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy by Colleen Carroll



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Summary by Cara Whitaker, written exclusively for The Goldhead Group, Ltd

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About the Author

Colleen Carroll received her bachelor's degree from Marquette University in Wisconsin. She has worked most notably as a speechwriter to President George W. Bush and as a news and editorial writer for the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. She has contributed to a variety of publications, appeared on national television and radio shows, and won several writing awards, including a \$50,000 Phillips Journalism Fellowship to write this book. Colleen has received much critical and national acclaim in response to the research and writing that went into *The New Faithful*. She is also a fellow at the Washington based Ethics and Public Policy Center and now hosts her own television show on EWTN, "Faith and Culture."

General Overview

This book examines today's orthodox faiths, in particular the Catholic faith, in order to see the sociological trends that have occurred due to a reversion of today's youth into the discarded faiths of their parents and grandparents. Today's generation seeks the rewards of heaven at the great price of moral adherence to a strict code of ethics. It is precisely this countercultural moral code that strikes against today's culture and makes orthodox faiths so appealing. Because of this, a new generation of faithful has immersed.

Chapter One: The Faithful

The first chapter begins with a quote from 1 Tim 4:12, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, and in purity." Carroll's depiction of an immersing Catholicism begins in a chapel at Catholic University of America, where at least five dozen students remain for Confession after a praise and worship session. For those students, and many more, there seems to be an irresistible attraction to the Sacrament of Confession. According to Carroll, "For them, the Sacraments and devotions of the institutional church allow them to be cleansed, healed, and strengthened. For young adults . . . these rites offer something so powerful that they weep in the face of it, so irresistible that they cannot walk away from it."

Why is there such an attraction to the transcendent from a generation who has had little or no exposure to it? Today's young adults have grown up in a society saturated with relativism where ethical and religious truths vary according to the people who hold them. Why are young people so attracted to those trappings of tradition that both their parents and teachers have rejected? According to Professor Peter Kreeft, what they are craving is the Holy Spirit. They are so devoid of structure that there is a new interest from today's adults in organized religion and conventional morality.

The attraction of today's young adults toward conventional religion and morality can be seen in a survey polling young Catholics. A survey of young Catholics, conducted by a group of Sociologists, "suggested that the three core elements of the faith of today's Catholics are belief in God's presence in the Sacraments, concern for helping the poor, and devotion to Mary as the mother of God—all key tenants of an orthodox Catholic faith." There is a similar trend toward a traditional form of creed with Protestants and Jews alike. This seems to indicate that if one is going to hold any creed then it better be radical.

An embrace of traditional forms of religion and its corresponding morality begins with a rejection of relativism. Relativism is the theory that all values or judgments are equal and none are absolute or universal. Today's young adults are taught time and time again that no universal moral standards or religious truths exist. They begin to question this and seek these truths which they believe to be knowable. According to Professor Jean Bethke Elshtain, an ethics professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School, "I certainly have detected among my students a sort of quest for some kind of purpose or meaning . . . my students are the most thoughtful and demanding. Some have been out in the world and they could not take the way it was being presented to them." A rejection of the secular status quo has occurred as, "they have witnessed the breakup of

their own families or friends' families," said Brad Wilcox a postdoctoral fellow in sociology at Princeton who has authored studies on Christian marriage and family issue. "They have experienced the dark side of the sexual revolution and are seeking some kind of meaning or structure."

One question in this chapter remains, who are the young faithful? These young adults are not perpetual seekers. They are committed to a religious worldview that grounds their lives and shapes their morality. Regardless of their religious formation, today's young Americans have not accepted orthodoxy without critical reflection. The bombardment by today's society will not permit that. They accept religious tolerance, but do not compartmentalize their faith. Faith permeates their lives. So who are these people? Colleen Carroll characterizes them quite well; "They tend to be cultural leaders, young adults blessed with talent, intelligence, good looks, wealth, successful careers, impressive educational pedigrees, or charisma—or some dynamic combination thereof. They are the sort of people who, according to conventional wisdom, do not *need* religion; though they have had their share of rough times, most did not arrive at their convictions out of utter desperation or lack of alternatives." These young people have made conscious commitments. They are the type of people who others look to when making decisions concerning their own lives. When they speak, people listen.

Most young orthodox believers of all creeds share similar characteristics: "Their identity is centered on their religious beliefs, and their morality derives from those beliefs, they are attracted to a worldview that challenges many core values of the dominant secular culture while addressing their deepest questions and concerns, they embrace challenging faith commitments that offer them firm guidelines on how to live their lives, their adherence to traditional morality and religious devotion often comes at considerable personal cost, and the sacrificial nature of these commitments is often precisely what makes them attractive, they yearn for mystery and tend to trust their intuitive sense that what they have found is true, real, and worth living to the extreme, they seek guidance and formation from legitimate sources of authority and trust these authorities to help them find lasting happiness and avoid repeating their own painful mistakes or those of their parents and peers, they strive for personal holiness, authenticity, and integration in their spiritual lives and are attracted to people and congregations that do the same, they are repelled by complacency, hypocrisy, and pandering, their beliefs and practices often defy conventional wisdom about their generation, the expectations of religious leaders, and existing classifications of believers with individual domination, they are concerned with impacting and engaging the larger culture, yet they are equally committed to living out their beliefs in the context of authentic communities that support them and hold them accountable." This generation is seeking, and those who have found orthodox religion permeate all aspects of their life with it.

Chapter Two: The Search

This chapter opens with a famous quotation by St. Augustine, "Our hearts were made for you, oh Lord, and they are restless until they rest in thee." It also opens with the conversion story of David Legge. At the age of 24 Legge had completed two years of Yale Law School. He had a summer associate's job at a big firm in New York that paid more money than he could spend. His weekly routine consisted of nights out at the city's hottest restaurant, bars, and clubs. The living was very good, but it was also very hollow for Legge. During this hollow time in his life, Legge recalled that he had never applied as much intellectual rigor to the study of his faith as he had to his schoolwork. According to Legge, "I thought, you know, I know so much more about Abraham Lincoln than I do about Jesus. And Jesus should be so much more important in my life. Maybe I should learn something about him." After Legge's realization that he knew very little about his faith, he started reading the classics: the Bible, the Catechism, St. Augustine, and Thomas Merton. A slow but steady conversion had begun to take place with Legge.

Two questions are then raised: Do young Christians lack essential knowledge about their faith and resist the teachings and standards that define their Churches or do they harbor a deep spiritual hunger and curiosity about Christian tradition that makes them inclined to embrace orthodoxy in all of its rigor and particularity? For the young adults who turn toward Christian orthodoxy, their conversion usually begins with a discontentment with

the values, or lack of, which have been thrust on them by all aspects of popular culture. Four general patterns run through the stories of young adults attracted to orthodox religion: they have achieved secular success at a young age, and it leaves them hungry for meaning, they have been exposed to ‘water-down’ religion, moral relativism, or atheism, and they crave its opposite, they have practiced religion out of a sense of duty but now want a more personal relationship with God and a more intentional way to worship him, or they have had personal religious devotion since childhood but long for a more integrated faith that is supported by community.

Today many youth experience what can only be termed as an early mid-life crisis. According to Carroll, “Whether reacting against the uncertainty of secular success or achieving that success at any early age and finding it empty, many of today’s young adults see Christianity—and particularly a commitment to Christian service—as a way out of the corporate trap.” The most shocking aspect of this phenomenon, for many observers, is that many young adults drawn to orthodoxy have had little if any religious formation. The lack of anything substantial is what leaves them searching for, ‘something with substance.’ According to St. Paul, “where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.” Today’s culture leaves one searching for more.

However, just because one comes to knowledge of the truth does not necessarily mean that one will live that truth. The stiff moral commands that come with truth are not always the easiest to follow. A big help with this difficulty is the fact that the strongest attribute of today’s believers is that they chose orthodoxy with enthusiasm. It is not something that has been inherited with indifference. However, young adults who are forever searching for spiritual highs and religious truths may find the routine of daily devotion to be rather dull. According to Carroll, “Their spiritual hunger predisposes them to hearing the Christian message, but their secular culture leaves them ill-suited to put its moral and behavioral demands into practice . . . Those who have embraced orthodoxy generally cite three factors that made their commitment possible: the grace of God, a supportive faith community, and personal resolve.”

Chapter Three: The Church and Worship

Chapter Three opens with the John 4:23, “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.” It is in an Eastern Orthodox Church that we meet Andrea Whitson, a convert from Protestantism. She was born in Texas and raised as a Southern Baptist. She joined the Episcopal Church when she married her husband, John Whitson, also a former Southern Baptist. Soon after their marriage, the Whitsons wanted out of their Episcopal congregation, that now ordained active homosexuals, and into a Church that adhered to conventional moral teachings while also offering sacramental grace. When her husband’s inquiries convinced him that a conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy was the answer, Andrea recoiled. She did not understand why she should stand through a two-hour service shrouded in intelligible symbolism and conducted in a foreign language. According to Andrea, “He convinced me logically, but I did not want to make the change . . . It was very foreign.” Two days after a visit to an Eastern Orthodox Church, that left her very uncomfortable, Andrea dreamed that she had returned to that Orthodox Church. “This time she sensed that Christ was enthroned on the altar. But she couldn’t see him clearly because angels were blocking her view. She recognized that the angels were serving as doors, much as the iconostasis separates the altar from the nave.” An important question arose from the dream, “Do you want to worship God in the way he wants to be worshiped or in the way that makes you comfortable?”

As we witnessed with Mrs. Whitson, churches that demand sacrifice and celebrate tradition often appeal to world-weary adults. Most of the people interviewed for this book, “oppose the blessing of same-sex marriages, the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals, premarital and extramarital sexual relations, and abortion.” A good Church is a Church that constantly challenges its followers to live in accordance with reality, especially when it comes to items such as the aforementioned issues. The faithful, who have been raised in typical mainline Churches, typically complain about an inadequate formation that placed too much emphasis on the vague platitudes of tolerance and love. Those faithful who do not leave their mainline Churches demonstrate a

particular affinity for the most traditional aspects of devotion: fixed hour prayer, the rosary, Eucharistic adoration, and the Latin Mass.

There has been a revival in the mystery of faith. Matthew Pinto, founder of the *Envoy* magazine, believes that young adults in a postmodern society are drawn to the fresh, countercultural quality of orthodoxy and tradition. According to Pinto, “This stuff is so outrageous that it’s attractive . . . in many ways, our job now is easier now than it was in the past, because people are starving.”

A few years ago the Hartford Institute for Religion Research released *Faith Communities Today*, the largest survey of United States Congregations that has ever been released. The survey documented a surge in both evangelical Christians and Mormons. Both groups are known for their hard-line moral stances. In its explanation on why some congregations thrive and others decline, there was a strong correlation between the congregations vitality and its commitment to high moral standards. According to the survey, “Two out of three congregations that emphasize personal and public morality also report healthy finances and membership growth. Congregations that place less emphasis on these standards are more likely to report plateaued or declining membership. It is often the quality of the Church’s worship, the degree to which it displays both God’s mystery and meaning, that solidifies a member.

According to Moss, a Catholic apologist, “People think that if we make it easy on [young adults], we’ll draw them in,’ she said. “It’s the very opposite. Youth are looking for a cause, a reason to live. They need something to give their lives to. A Christianity that says, ‘Go to church on Sunday and be a nice person’—that’s no cause. Christianity doesn’t say go to Church on Sunday. Jesus said, ‘He who loses His life will find it.’ In other words, ‘If you don’t love me about all things, you’re not worthy of me.’ But few people are given that message.” The key to reaching young adults is to help them grow and not just to keep them comfortable. A rich liturgical life will do just that.

Chapter Four: Faith Communities and Fellowship

Chapter four opens with the first line of Psalm 133, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.” To establish this verse’s pertinence we much first characterize the human need for community and fellowship, especially among the young. There are a few traits that are generally attributed to Generation X: they are interested in spirituality, ignorant of tradition, and fearful of both commitment and abandonment. According to Carroll, “In some ways, these young adults look like a novice director’s nightmare. They marry late, switch jobs and careers often, and move at whim. Deference to authority strikes many as odd, even laughable. And notions of self-sacrifice and obedience puzzle many young adults who learned from their parents, teachers and cultural leaders to privilege personal fulfillment and autonomy above all else.” Amongst all of this, something that stands out amongst Generation X is its craving for community.

Generation X, more than any other generation, has lived in community and isolation. It is this isolation that gives them a longing for community and a stable family structure. According to one priest, “They’re really hungry for real fatherhood . . . it is an evident switch.” Generation X has been reared in a media culture that constantly panders to every whim that they have. Orthodox religion presents the young with obedience, objective morality, stability, commitment, and integration—the very things that they have found wanting in both their families and the culture.

The power of a personal witness may be what makes the difference between attraction and conversion for many young adults. Many find the religious lifestyle both intriguing and attractive, but it is the witness of the life of a Christian lifestyle that makes others believe that it is both doable and satisfying. A few witnesses can be a large inspiration to so many people. According to one young adult, “You don’t need a whole generation. You need about twelve . . . There are all these people in our generation, and you can take a relatively small number of them. If they’re committed to loving God, loving their neighbor, following Christ, it’s stronger than

the natural forces keeping us apart—alienation, self-centeredness, even religious differences. If we're able to overcome those things, then it's revolutionary.”

Chapter Five: Sexuality and Family

The beatitude from Matthew 5:8 begins chapter five: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” One of the most difficult issues facing a life of morality is an adherence to a strict code of sexual ethics. In addition to fighting for sexual morality in their own lives, young adults have established a counter revolution to the sexual revolution.

In the sexual revolution of the 1960's and the 1970's free love and casual sex were novel concepts to the young sexual revolutionaries. Today, things have changed. Committed relationships, not casual hookups are the novelty. Premarital sex among teenagers, once considered a taboo, is now almost a norm. In reaction to this and all that they are being deprived of, a growing number of young adults are rebelling against their elders in the way that they dress, date, marry, and mate. A 1998 UCLA survey of college freshman found approval of sexual promiscuity at 25 year low. In 1998, 39.6 percent of students thought that casual sex was acceptable. This was a 12.3 percent drop from the record high of 51.9 percent in 1987. Books such as *The Rules: Time tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, *I Kissed dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris, and Wendy Shalit's *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* have experienced astounding popularity and success. People have realized that the effects of the sexual revolution are not making them happy and they want to do something about it. Instead, they are seeking chastity.

Sexuality often plays a key role in many of the conversions of young Christians. Christianity's strong stance on sexual morality addresses their deepest concerns in a way that secular values do not. The ideal about traditional sexual morality possesses a beauty that challenges yet satisfies. A spouse can be the greatest support on earth that any Christian is able to find. A mutual focus on God defines the best marriages of many young orthodox Christians. In his apostolic exhortation *The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, John Paul II cited Tertullian, an early Church Father, on marriage:

How wonderful the hope between two believers, with a single hope, a single desire, a single observance, a single service! They are both brethren and both fellow servants; there is no separation between them in spirit or flesh; in fact they are truly two in one flesh, and where the flesh is one, one is the spirit. It is mutual dependence on God that leads God-fearing couples to submit everything to God, including how many children to have.

One stance that historical Christianity has always taken is a stance against artificial means of contraception. Many Churches have backed away against that stance, but it is the Catholic and Orthodox Churches that have maintained prohibitions against artificial means of contraception. According to Carroll, “Sex has two functions: bonding and babies. When couples block one of those functions, the Church teaches, they cut God out of the equation and short-circuit the total gift of self that sex should be. Artificial contraception also carries broader social consequences, according to the Church: it encourages extramarital sex, undermines marriage and the family, and allows people to more easily use each one another as a means to an end.” Although still in the minority, an increasing number of Catholics have begun to use natural family planning (NFP). NFP allows a woman to predict fertility by monitoring her body's signals. In order to postpone pregnancy, the couple must abstain from sex for several days each month during the woman's ovulation. This forces the couple to discuss daily the woman's fertility and whether the couple is ready to have a child. Is there any other method of postponing pregnancy that requires communication from both spouses? This answer is no.

Another phenomena that has gained immense popularity among Christians who want to pass on their faith to their children is home schooling. It is an extremely popular alternative to public, private, or liberal parochial schools. The ranks of homeschooled students today number in the millions. Homeschooling allows parents to inculcate values into their children that they might not otherwise receive as students in any type of school.

Homeschooling is a way to significantly strengthen the family and instill sexual morality into the next generation.

Chapter Six: The Campus

The question, “If you are really a product of a materialistic universe, how is it that you don’t feel at home there?” posed by C.S. Lewis, opens this chapter on the college campus. America’s colleges and universities have long been incubators for new ideas and the resurgence of old ones. A few examples of this in history have been the sexual revolution, the civil rights movement, and the suspicion of both government and organized religion. According to Carroll, “The once prevalent assumptions of modernity—that progress is inevitable and that reason alone, not religious faith, leads to truth—have gradually given way to a postmodern rejection of reason and embrace of relativism, the idea that objective truth is not knowable.” Relativism and postmodernism predominate.

Although relativism and postmodernism predominate, a growing number of college students have been embracing orthodoxy amidst a secular college environment. Robert George, a political scientist who has taught at Princeton for at least fifteen years, has witnessed a movement that has united conservative students across the Judeo-Christian spectrum. Jews to Protestants to Catholics are becoming, “orthodox and enthusiastic.” On such campuses, orthodox students gravitate toward vibrant fellowships that offer them support against the battle that is encompassed under the umbrella of liberalism.

Orthodox youth seeking fellowship also seek fellowship at colleges and universities that integrate faith and reason both inside and outside of the classroom. Enrollment rose 24 percent between 1990 and 1996 at the ninety-five schools that belong to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). That contrasted sharply with the 5 percent rise at non-religious private schools and the 4 percent increase at secular universities. In Catholic circles, students seeking immersion in orthodoxy often choose one of the “Big Six” schools: Christendom College in Virginia, Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio, Magdalen College in New Hampshire, Thomas Aquinas College in California, the College of St. Thomas More in New Hampshire, and the University of Dallas in Texas. Several of these schools have experienced enrollment surges in the past few years that have been attributed to adherence to the Vatican and an emphasis on classical education. Tom McFadden, the public relations correspondent from Christendom College, said, “They want to come back to the faith.” At Christendom a strict dress code is employed and plenty of pre-Vatican II piety is offered.

With a rise in campus ministry, the Catholic Church has risen to the need in its own ranks. Rather than lose Catholics to more pro-active evangelical groups, the Catholic Church is seeking to staff campuses with campus ministry teams. The need cannot be met fast enough. Curtis Martin, a Catholic in his forties who discovered evangelicalism at college and then later rediscovered his Catholic faith, launched the international Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS). FOCUS offers many different venues to its students: small-group studies of Scripture and the early Church Fathers, formation for student leaders, help for students who want to communicate Christian principles on campus, and large group events that allow Catholics on campus to witness to their friends. FOCUS along with so many other campus ministry teams is experiencing results. Although these results are at first in small measures, the tides are turning toward a more prevalent form of Christian orthodoxy at all colleges and universities, both orthodox and secular.

Chapter Seven: Politics

“I am the king’s faithful servant, but God’s first,” stated St. Thomas More, martyr to the Roman Catholic faith. The chapter on politics opens at the annual March for Life that is held every year on the anniversary of Roe vs. Wade, January 22. It is there that we find tens of thousands of mostly young marchers who have converged from all over the U.S. to the nation’s capital. The March for Life is a way that young believers reject the separation of sacred and secular. They are not content to distance themselves from a society full of unwanted

pregnancies, abortions, addictions, and divorce. Instead, they take a stand. Today's faithful seek to actively engage today's culture and the March for Life, a demonstration to the Supreme Court, is one way that this mission is accomplished.

According to Carroll, "Recent studies have shown a shift toward political conservatism among young Americans." One study indicated that more young respondents in the 1990's agreed that extramarital sex was always wrong, that military merits confidence, and that the death penalty should be used for murder. Support for legal abortion has also declined. There is a tremendous amount of youth in the pro-life movement. One pro-life group that particularly stands out is Crossroads, a pro-life organization composed of organizers and college students that every summer walks across the United States of America to witness to the dignity and sanctity of human life from conception to natural death.

The young orthodox are also taking an active role in politics. In the book we meet one young lady, Lauren Hoyes, whose evangelical faith and pro-life stance led her to Capitol Hill. She works as a legislative director for Republican Congressman Joseph Pitts from Pennsylvania. She spends most of her time working with the Values Action Team, a coalition of socially conservative Congressman and outside groups that work on legislation dealing with topics such as abortion, marriage, and education. Another congressional staff member for Pitts says that she watches for opportunities throughout the day to evangelize her coworkers, ranging from a quick prayer to a conversation. Even politics feels the conservative bent of the young orthodox.

Chapter Eight: The Call

Luke 10:2, "He told them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'" Young Christians who are intent on spiritual integration throughout all areas of their lives pay particular importance to how their faith informs their work. Despite the sacred-secular divide associated with today's workforce, Americans are increasingly unwilling to leave their faith at the office door. A Gallup poll indicated that 48 percent of employees had discussed their faith at work in the last 24 hours. While employers tend to generalize faith to nothing at all in order to 'welcome' everyone, some manifestations of faith at work are surprisingly specific. These include all spectrums from the physicians in the Christian Medical and Dental Associations, to journalists in Gegerapha, to lawyers in the St. Thomas More society. For them a job is never just a job, it is an extension of their faith journey.

Chapter Nine: The Future

"For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, nor for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope," Jeremiah 29:11. In her concluding chapter Carroll focuses on two factors that are the key to the success of believers in order transform their culture: ecumenism and balance. According to Carroll:

If these young believers continue to embrace opportunities to work together across denominational and even interdenominational lines without airbrushing significant theological differences, they have the potential to transform American religion and culture. If they refuse to do so, recoiling instead into their various subcultures to avoid the ideologically impure, their effects on American culture will be diluted and their obedience to Christ's Gospel imperative of unity will be incomplete. That insularity also will damage the credibility of their movement, relegate it to the fringes of society, and perhaps even repel their own children, who are apt to rebel against the subculture as did some of these believers and many of their parents.

The struggle of today's orthodox is a search for balance. Christianity should be in the world, but not of the world. Believers should find a balance between protecting their convictions from contamination and reaching

out to the world to share those convictions. It is difficult but prayer, Scripture, and the Sacraments make it possible.

John Paul II, a hero to many of the new faithful, said that the new evangelization of today's society cannot happen without strong Christian families. According the former Pope, "The extent to which the Christian family accepts the Gospel and matures in faith, it becomes an evangelizing community." The combination of a fierce determination to avoid divorce, strong faith communities that support marriage vows, and the belief in marriage as a divinely blessed bond found in chapter five seems to bode well for the future of the Christian family and American culture in general.

Courage and charity are two more key components to achieving a proper sense of balance. Some believers will contribute to the divisions in churches while others will challenge and inspire other believers. According to Carroll, "Those who balance truth and love, courage and charity, their impact on the church will be powerful and lasting." This is already evident in an examination of religious education. Adult classes have sprung up all over the United States to meet the needs of the adults who have been poorly catechized in the past. Those same adults who have been seeking a re-catechesis in their own lives are also seeking to give children the religious education that they never had. The same young adults are also forming the clergy that will shape the Church in the next generation. The youth have rediscovered the faith and through their rediscovery bring bright rays of hope for the future of orthodox faiths across America.