

# Anthony Pogorelc on the Changing Spirituality of Emerging Adults

*By Louis B. Weeks*

Anthony Pogorelc, a Sulpician priest, balances three appointments at the Catholic University of America — Director of Pastoral Formation and Dean of Men for its Theological College, Administrator/Researcher for their Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies, and adjunct faculty member in the Department of Sociology. Among his duties at the Institute is directing a study of emerging adults and overseeing the Web site “[ChangingSEA.org](http://www.ChangingSEA.org)” educating the public on the changing nature of spirituality among them. Changing SEA is a significant resource in the effort to understand the culture of “the millennial generation” and minister effectively among them.

Pogorelc received a bachelor’s degree at St. Mary’s in San Antonio, majoring in political science. After six years teaching high school, he spent a year teaching and traveling in India and Nepal before moving to Canada for theological education. He received an M.Div. from St. Michael’s College, of the Toronto School of Theology and was ordained to the Catholic priesthood in 1988. He then served as priest successively for two Spanish-speaking parishes in San Antonio. Thereafter he completed a master’s and doctorate in sociology at Purdue University (Ph.D., 2002).

At Catholic University, he has collaborated in many projects and studies of social movements, including that of the lay-generated movement responding to the scandal surrounding sexual abuse by some clerics and its cover up. He now leads a team of scholars studying the spirituality of emerging adults. He speaks and teaches throughout the country on the implications of the research and the resources available on “[ChangingSEA.org](http://www.ChangingSEA.org).” He is also active in the Society for

the Scientific Study of Religion, the Religious Research Association, and the Association for the Sociology of Religion.

This conversation is edited.

***Q: Father Pogorelc, what drew you into this vocation?***

**A:** Well, I was raised in the Slovenian ethnic community of Milwaukee. My parents were in the tavern business and remain so, and I’ve always been around people and observing people, listening to them and in dialogue with them. Those interests and experiences led me toward both the priestly ministry and toward my theological and sociological work. My time in Toronto at St. Michael’s was fascinating. A lot was going on in ecumenism, and the consortium involved a variety of denominations.

The two parishes in San Antonio also informed my vocation. The first was a lower middle class parish near St. Mary’s University. The second was middle and upper class on the north side of town. The second was particularly interesting, for there were numbers of people passing through town as well as the regular parishioners. The medical school was nearby. It was kind of at a crossroads. I was counseling those getting married — some at the church and some back in their hometowns. I enjoyed the diversity of the place. Sociologically-speaking, the parish was ethnically Latino but culturally Anglo. Some middle and some upper class. Great people to work with, serve, and learn from.

My master’s and doctorate programs at Purdue University focused on social issues, working with James Davidson as my major professor. In the masters program, I studied ‘Catholics and authority’; and I found generational differences among believers even then as they related to church people in authority. In my doctorate I followed a social movement, “Call to Action,” consisting of Catholic laity across the country. I focused on their changing relationships with the Catholic bishops — from a stance of cooperation to opposition, again to cooperation and back to opposition over time.

***Q: Then you began your work here directly from Purdue?***

**A:** Yes. I work at the seminary with students in field education and internships. Again, that’s a job that gets me in the field a lot. Frequently the internships are outside the area. I teach courses in the sociology department. And then my work at the Institute has been varied. I worked with Bill D’Antonio in a study of lay responses to the clerical sexual abuse scandal, and our findings became a book.

**(Voices of the Faithful: Loyal Catholics Striving for Change. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2007)**

I was on the advisory committee for Dean Hoge’s group based at the Institute studying the spirituality of emergent adults. When he died so unexpectedly, I consented to become the director of that effort. I work with a really good team — including Jim Youniss, a psychologist here at Catholic University, Tim Clydesdale, a sociologist at the College of New Jersey, and Kathleen Garces-Foley, in religious studies at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia.

The product from that study is the web site, “[ChangingSEA.org](http://www.ChangingSEA.org),” the changing spirituality of emerging adults. Currently the website consists in two groups of essays and links to other resources. One set of essays explains, “Who are the emerging adults are today?” “What social forces affect their lives?” and the other set looks carefully at some congregations that they like.

**Q: That phrase, “emerging adults,” has come to have many meanings. What do you mean by the term, “emerging adults”?**

**A:** The term, “emerging adults,” actually came from Jeffrey Arnett, whose book in 2004 bore that title. It’s the young people ages 18-25 although now it can apply even to those nearing age 30. Sometimes the label “young adult” is used as a synonym. Others use the phrase “emerging adult” for those 18-23 or so and “young adult” for those in their mid-twenties until they are about 30. This age cohort is also frequently labeled, “Millennials.”

We have emerging adult populations now in large measure because of our longer life-spans today. It used to be people went from childhood to adulthood. Then it was childhood, adolescence, adulthood. Now some would say it’s a full decade for most between adolescence and full adulthood.

For the more affluent it can be a time of exploration and adventure. It can be a time of college, backpacking through Europe, and graduate school. For those less affluent it can be a time of hardship, not finishing college, accumulating debt; and they frequently end up in low-paying jobs.

Emerging adults are often referred to as deferring full-fledged adulthood. For those who can afford it, it can be a very pleasant time of life, but for those who cannot they gain independence rather quickly but it’s a very difficult independence.

**Q:** *It’s interesting that you quickly differentiate groups within the cohort. Are there differences among them in terms of religion and spirituality?*

**A:** Yes. Several different typologies have been developed for studying their religiosity. One is from a group led by Christian Smith at Notre Dame. Their National Study of Youth and Religion tracks 3300 young people starting in teen years and they plan to follow them into later adulthood. Basically, he looks at 15% of emerging adults as “traditionally religious.” 30% he would term “selective adherents,” people who customize their beliefs and practices. He and others make a lot of this tendency. Robert Wuthnow terms these emerging adults, “tinkerers.” Another 15%, Smith talks about as being “spiritually open.” These people are interested in spirituality and religion. Another 25% he says are “religiously indifferent.” And finally, 15% would be seen as “disconnected spiritually.” Smith tends to take a rather pessimistic view, I think, and given his definition of religiosity only 15% of emerging adults qualify as “really religious.”

But from my perspective, you can add the “selective adherents” and the “spiritually open.” That way you find about 60% that one way or another have a positive interest in religion.

I’m also familiar with the work of John Roberto, and I think his typology would correlate in part with the types that Smith locates, but Roberto is more optimistic as well about the percentages of interested and observant emerging adults.

A couple of Smith disciples — Lisa Pearce and Melinda Denton — have taken data from the study and developed a book called *A Faith of Their Own* (New York: Oxford, 2011). They locate a couple of categories I find particularly interesting. One is a group they call “the assenters,” emergent adults who claim belief in God but their beliefs have low salience. They might come out for high holidays, sometimes with their family, or in deference to a significant other. But it is not a big part of their identity and practice.

Another group they define as “adapters.” They claim a belief in God and they feel close to God. But for them it is more personal and less institutional in nature. So their level of participation in religious life would be minimal or medium. They also would say they spend time thinking about the meaning of life and service to others. It’s a religiosity that is affective, would not exclude attendance in worship or for personal prayer. We would like to study this group in greater depth.

**Q:** *Tell us about some of the findings from the studies presented in Changing SEA.*

**A:** A few general findings: We find that the markers for adulthood — financial independence, marriage, beginning a career, having children — all are now (happening later) for most people in our American society than they used to.

I was talking with someone recently about a résumé of an emerging adult. I commented on the number of different jobs that showed, and he said “That’s typical for a young adult these days. In fact, if there are too few job changes on the résumé they may be considered, ‘Not industrious.’ ‘Not adventuresome.’” Where once upon a time showing a single job in which you stayed a long time might be seen as virtuous, it might now be seen as “risk averse.”

Again, the religious landscape is different today. A lot of churches still focus ministry on the traditional, nuclear family. They operate out of the assumption that singleness is a short term, temporary phase. Emerging adults defer marriage. As a result they are single for a long time, and the churches that most effectively work with them respond and accept them in their singleness. They invite them into the church to feel like real members, real participants and sometimes leaders.

You also find that Protestant evangelicals do the best job generally of reaching out to emergent adults. Catholics would come next, and then mainline Protestants. Catholic congregations tend to be the most diverse ethnically.

Emerging adults usually gravitate toward larger congregations. They want to meet and be with other emerging adults, so there can be a real connection for seeking spirituality but also for gaining social relationships.

Another theme in many of our essays is the shift regarding work and finances. The high-risk economy has a profound effect on their lives. So does the instability in wages and benefits. They like being “tinkerers” in the work situation as well. They like for work to be fun and flexible. And they also like structure. Their parents have brought them up arranging for them to be with other children. They have always been told that they are “special.” And they like to be successful. They expect to be creative. All these factors influence their choice of work situations.

On the other hand, they are also usually constricted in their financial resources. College debt and health care have continuing effects on their ability to choose agreeable work locations and jobs. Many have to return to live with their parents as emerging adults — a difficult situation most of the time for all involved.

**Q:** *Tell us more about first group of essays?*

**A:** We offer essays on emerging adult participation in congregations, civic life, faith, and spirituality, friends and friendships, sexual issues, and marriage and family. We also center on race and ethnicity, schooling, money and issues of debt, mental health, and vocation. Each essay offers good insights for those who work with emerging adults.

In the essay on “Racial and Ethnic Dynamics Among Contemporary Young Adults,” for example, Gerardo Marti points to the fact that more minority young people are going to college. On the other hand, the lack of support structures and financial restraints determine if they can stay, whether they leave, or if they have to take a break to make money. The expansion of community colleges helps, but minority emerging adults are underrepresented in the elite colleges, where support structures are more prevalent.

Several of the essay focus on development of relationships — so important in personal development. We learn about ourselves in large measure from the perceptions and expectations of others about us. Out of relationships grow the sense of self-esteem and the development of empathy. Something you see across the board — in friendships, in dating relationships, in marriage — frequently the people who partner-up tend to be of the same social class and ethnic background. Even today when many encourage dating and friendships between people of different backgrounds it doesn’t happen that often. Again, there seems to be a lot more homogeneity than heterogeneity in relationships among emerging adults — people close to those who feel, think, and look like them. Interestingly, even the connections on-line are most frequently with those they have already met in person.

In terms of sexuality, there are now contested definitions of “sex,” and sexual activity, but there is definitely a correlation between sexual practices and religiosity. Religiosity can be a strong reason to maintain virginity through college. It has bearing on whether one tolerates or does not tolerate pornography. Whether one uses contraceptives. Again, the types of friends one has are usually supportive of one’s practices. There is a “hook-up” culture, but there is also a strong serial monogamy culture among emerging adults. This is spelled out especially in the article by Mark Regnerus.

The essay by John Bartkowski on marriage and cohabitation shows that emerging adults are deferring marriage, but 85% of them intend to marry some time. They are more looking for a “soul-mate” than drawn by issues of sex and

procreation. There is a correlation between religiosity and marriage timing, and between ethnicity and marriage timing. It's still unclear, however, whether it's positive young adults who marry or whether marriage is seen as a positive for emerging into adulthood. It's a chicken and egg thing.

We explore the civic and political involvement of young adults, too. James Youniss points out that deferring adulthood results in the young adults deferring development of their own definition of their political interests. They might stay with political interests of the parents. Organized mobilization has lots to do with drawing people into civic engagements. So the decline of unions means fewer opportunities for young adults to grow in a community of engagement, especially among the working classes. Again, because they don't have their own money, political parties and unions aren't that interested in them. They can't help financially, and their work is so sporadic.

***Q: And the second series of essay focuses on congregations?***

**A:** Yes. The second group of essays focuses on congregations and parishes successfully drawing emerging adults and assimilating them as participants and leaders. Most of these are ethnographically-oriented studies, from mainline Protestantism, evangelical Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism. You can read these essays and they can help people who work with emerging adults in congregations and parishes — mega-churches, city churches, emerging churches, and suburban congregations.

Congregations that provide a “home” for emerging adults are most effective. For young adults, it is a very transient time of life, and especially with geographical relocation. The family and groups of friends that nurtured them earlier are no longer available. Where older adult members are very welcoming to young adults, invite them into leadership and participation as well as attendance — there the emerging adults feel fulfilled and at home.

Older adults in churches successfully including emerging adults show they appreciate the younger people — their ideas, their work, their prayers. But they also appreciate the limits of emerging adults. Most young adults don't have a lot to put in the collections. Often they don't have a lot of time, especially for long range projects. So short term, significant things — ad hoc projects — are welcomed.

Young adults like diverse communities. That is one place Catholic churches excel. And they don't like the combination of church and right wing politics. That makes them nervous. Inclusivity is a positive value. Media is good, and the use

of social networking. A good congregational web page is a plus. But don't use technology as a gimmick. They can smell gimmicks and are wary of those who employ them.

Emerging adults respond well to the ministry of a strong pastor—one who is fatherly or motherly in a nurturing way. They like good preaching and teaching. They like pastors who have a vision of the work of the Gospel in that congregation — someone who can address problems but also assemble teams of people to meet challenges. And someone who has a good sense of outreach — doesn't wait, but steps out to meet people.

They respond well to worship at times they can come — a late Sunday afternoon Mass or a late morning service with hospitality times accompanying—wine and cheese after a late afternoon Mass, for example, or some breakfast or brunch after a morning time of worship. And they like to be where there are other emerging adults, so it can take a “critical mass” in their cohort and word that they are welcome. Set up the opportunity for people to meet one another. Things off campus are popular too — in a coffee house or a home or dorm. “Theology on tap” something held in a bar. That seems especially appropriate for those “adaptors” we were talking about. Off campus, people who are more religious can invite those less religious to share equally in the events — neutral ground.

**Q:** *What is the third segment to focus?*

**A:** We are still honing the topic, but we certainly want to focus on what Pearce and Denton term the “adaptors.” This group of emergent adults says they feel close to God. They adapt religious traditions according to their own individual needs and desires. But religion has high salience for them. They really care about the meaning of life and other deep questions. Religious attendance is medium, with some regular attending and others not. They engage in service to others. It's a religiosity that would not exclude attendance or personal prayer. We find them particularly interesting and we would like to study them in greater depth. Perhaps a survey and some individual, in depth interviews.

I also appreciate the book by Helen Astin, Alexander Astin, and Jennifer Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit* (San Francisco; Jossey-Bass, 2010). It goes into greater depth with the terms “spiritual” and “religious.” Those are terms we bandy about a lot, but frequently they are not well-defined. They created multi-connectional scales based on a number of different questions. They look at the structures of support and the experience of crisis, for example. Is their spirituality enhanced by relationships? Is it fostered in a time of feeling abandoned? It can also be enhanced by inner work — whether prayer,



meditation, or reflection. Participation in groups. Sustained intellectual activity. They look at these factors. And they examine things that would work against spiritual development — overextension in too many activities, consumption of alcohol, addiction to media or video.

They develop scales for spirituality, and for religiosity too. That would track the outward things — attendance in worship, prayer in groups, service projects, other religious practices. These scales would be good to explore, for they go beyond the shallow division of spiritual and religious.

***Q: Are you finding differences within the Latino and other Spanish-speaking groups of emerging adults? I imagine with your experience in Latino churches, that would be of special interest.***

**A:** Yes. And even more important, such a large percent of Catholic emerging adults are Latino. You do see divergence in the Catholic emerging adults, for Latinos and other Spanish-speakers make up 45% of them. In the area of work and money, the majority, 52% of Latino emergent adults come from families where the yearly income is less than \$25,000. From other families, only 15% of emergent adults are in that situation — with the family making less than \$25,000. To look at higher incomes on the other end, only 2% of Latino emerging adults come from families who make over \$100,000 a year. Among non-Latinos 31% come from these higher income families.

In matters of education, 29% of Latino emerging adults have less than a high school education, while non-Latinos have only 3% in that situation. And while 35% of non-Latino emerging adults graduate from college today, only 9% of Latinos are there. These are marked differences and they mean ministry must be tailored to meet their needs.

At a practical level, it doesn't work to lump all Latinos together, much less to group everyone into “Hispanic.” Mexicans identify themselves as Oaxaca, Chiapan, or another specific region or language. And others from Latin America will see themselves as Panamanian or Guatemalan Ixil, or from indigenous tribe in another of the countries. From South America they are Colombians, or Ecuadorians specifically. As you can tell, there's much more to study. Every finding points to additional areas for inquiry.

I think it would also be interesting to study emerging adults who are in careers of public service. We have many of them here in the D.C. area and they represent a number of religious traditions. Some of them would constitute what is called the “religious left,” a group in need of in-depth study.