Good evening!

My name is Ellen Koneck. I am the executive director at Commonweal, a 99-year-old institution insistent upon the need for nuanced, spacious, and deliberate conversation on matters of religion, politics, culture, and the arts. At our start, and still at our heart, we have been a Catholic, lay-led, print magazine. But we have found ways to extend this mission into new mediums: on our podcast, at live and virtual events, in local community groups, on our website, and elsewhere. In this sense, our organization has similar concerns to those of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative: we are passionate about the way dialogue around complex and current issues must be sustained through disciplined practice; and we are wondering how to make sure the stakes of our mission are as resonant and relevant to today's young Catholics as they were in their founding contexts.

Prior to joining Commonweal as executive director, I was the head writer and editor at Springtide Research Institute, an organization committed to examining sociological trends in the religious and spiritual lives of young people.

I'm also, I might add, a millennial-mother of two small children. I'm a cradle Catholic, the youngest of five kids, the rest of whom have no affiliation with the Catholicism of their upbringing. And I mention all of this because I happen to think each of these personal and professional details qualify me, in one way or another, to address this esteemed group tonight, as these details inform how I approach the goal of seeking common ground across generations in the church.

It is my great honor and privilege to offer opening remarks at this conference. My thanks, especially, to Steve Millies for the invitation, though a small part of me wishes to express something *other* than thanks. You see, the task Steve laid out in our initial conversation about this keynote—a task I agreed to take on heartily and enthusiastically—turned out to be quite a heavy lift. He suggested I might offer, and I quote, "a 360-degree view of the Church through the eyes of young Catholics." Whether I am capable of such a summary will be yours to judge by the end of this time we have together. I will certainly do my best.

If 360 degrees is the goal, we'll have to approach the question of young people in the Church from several angles—several vantage points. How about **four**. I'd like to think about this question *broadly, narrowly, historically, and currently*.

The broad view is the best place to start. It's the headline version of what many of us in the room may already know but may not have already articulated, perhaps not realizing that the felt reality in one's personal experience is in fact aligned with wider cultural trends. Leaning on my previous work in the world of sociological data, let me offer some headlines:

- First: Young people don't trust institutions.
    - Not banks, not government, not military, not big corporations, and I'm sorry to say, not religious institutions or their leaders. Where these pillars of society were once assurances of stability to generations emerging from wartime, or immigrant communities finding their footing in new contexts, these "too-big-to-fail"

institutions are now largely perceived as the opposite of stable: they are considered capricious and untrustworthy. And with good reason—weekly we see headlines of breached trust, bank bailouts, medical conspiracies, and, of course, the scandal of our Church's own sex abuse crisis and egregious cover-up. Whereas the posture of an older generation might have been to trust these authoritative pillars until it proves unwise to do so, young people default to skepticism about institutions, and require trust to be earned.

- Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that we arrive at this second headline: At higher rates than any other point in recorded history, young people are leaving or never joining the Church. PEW data suggests that if current trends continue, the category of "nones" will approach or exceed the number of Christians in the US within fifty years.
    - Let me break this statement down just a bit. I say "higher rates than at any other point in *recorded history*" because we don't really know what rates of disaffiliation or un-affiliation were in, say, the 1600s or 500s. That's because no one was asking that question at the time and then writing down the numbers in order to track longitudinal trends. But it's also because the question of affiliation status would have been an absurd one at the time, of course. The status of one's subjective and personal identification with one religious tradition amid access to *many* is a uniquely modern obsession. And while the narrative around disaffiliation is an excellent metric for producing handwringing, it's one of the least effective barometers for understanding the religious and spiritual lives of the upcoming generation.

- Which brings us to our third headline: Young people on the whole—even those who indicate that they are religious or spiritual—do not believe, identify, or practice in ways that are necessarily recognizable to older generations of religious and spiritual types. That is, they seem to be "doing religion" differently when they're doing religion at all.

In the past, it was common to assume that if someone claimed "affiliation" with a particular tradition, there was a corresponding set of practices, beliefs, and identities that came along with that designation. Springtide data demonstrate that this is not necessarily still the case.

- 52% of affiliated young people—so those who identify as belonging to a particular religious tradition—have little to no trust in organized religion
- Nearly one-third of affiliated young people said they do not think it's important to have a faith community.
- Over 1 in 5 young people who say they are affiliated with a religious tradition also say they don't try to live out their religious beliefs in their daily lives.

Interestingly, the opposite is also true.

The unaffiliated are not *un*interested in questions of God and meaning; in some cases, they may even be attending religious services or describing themselves as practicing religious values.

- 19% of unaffiliated young people (those who, on a survey say they are “none,” “nothing in particular,” or “not sure”) say that they attend religious gatherings at least once a month.
- 38% of unaffiliated young people say they are religious.
- 60% of unaffiliated young people say they are at least slightly spiritual.

So these are the headlines—the broad view that forms the backdrop and context of young people’s relationship to the church today. For young Catholics in particular—that is, those who on surveys indicate that they identify as Roman Catholics—the headlines are largely the same. Catholic young people are “doing religion” differently than you might expect.

For example, 42% of Catholic young people say they don’t turn to faith communities [in times of uncertainty] because of a lack of trust in the people, beliefs, and systems of organized religion.

When Springtide asked young Catholics what they believe about the existence of God,

- 12% say they don’t believe in a higher power
- 18% say they don’t know whether there is a higher power, and they don’t believe there is any way to find out.
- 15% say they doubt a higher power’s existence more than they believe.
- 28%, the highest percentage of all these options, though only just more than a quarter of young Catholics, say they believe in a higher power’s existence more than they doubt.
- 22% say they believe a higher power exists and they have no doubts about it.

Perhaps it's no wonder then, that "living out" religious beliefs or teachings is not an especially important effort to this group, given how ambivalent they are about just what it is they believe. 58% of young Catholics disagreed with the statement "I try hard to carry my religious beliefs into all my other dealings in life."

I wouldn't want these headlines to give the wrong impression. I wouldn't want anyone in the room to get the idea that declining trust, declining affiliation, and novel ways of expressing religious identity, practice, or belief are all indicative of a problem for young people and the church. There's quite a lot of reason to hope, in fact—even hope at the level of headlines.

Today, the vast majority of young people, a term that in this instance refers to people ages 13-25, consider themselves at least slightly spiritual (77%) or religious (68%). I think the most recent figures I've seen suggest that 77% of young people consider themselves spiritual and 68% religious. These should be heartening figures for those of us who peddle in the world of religion and religious ideas! And! There's even more good news. Young people who say they are religious are *more likely* to say they are "flourishing" across a range of categories measuring well-being—things like mental and emotional health, finances, school, work, and more. Let me say that again. The data suggests that religious young people report greater flourishing, across several metrics, than their non-religious peers.

These headlines are fascinating—they give us a sense of how young people are influencing and being influenced by shifting cultural and religious landscapes. But I'd like to get a bit more

specific now. Here's where I'd like to dive into the second angle of this 360-degree approach: the narrow.

The narrow view may also be called the personal view. Taking my cue from CCGI, I want to make space in these remarks for stories to emerge. And in these stories, I hope to make two points clear:

First, membership is not a meaningful metric.
Second, when people of good will leave the church, it must be received as a witness.

Let's make a closer examination of this narrow angle.

First: Membership is not a meaningful metric.

I've already alluded to this fact above—indicating that membership is a very modern concern, and one that does not really give us a great sense of anyone's actual posture toward the divine or their neighbor. But I'd like now to illustrate this with a story.

Before receiving the sacrament of confirmation, I was halfway out the door. By looking at me, no one could *tell* I was halfway out the door. That is, my membership status was quite intact. I had attended Mass every week of my life; I was attending a Catholic high school; generally I had no major streaks of rebellion or existential suffering that might have tipped someone off about

my internal disposition. I have a feeling many in this room may relate. I was not pushed away from the Church, we were just seemingly indifferent to each other. And I had the good sense to believe that the stakes of religious belief were a bit too high to permit such a casual connection. I wanted to be wow'd, or maybe woo'd. I wanted to be convinced, not just presented with rote materials. I was, in this way, an entirely average 13-year-old.

Despite stereotypes, I really don't think most 13-year-olds are apathetic or indifferent to the life of faith. They lack the language for it; they may not feel they have the option to opt-in or out of their parents' traditions. But the 2018 report from CARA and Saint Mary's Press called *Going, Going, Gone* found that 13 years old was the *average* age of disaffiliation among young Catholics. Even if they were ostensibly still members, most young people, upon looking back, could articulate a kind of interior departure from the faith of their childhood, a turning away, a lack of identification, a sense that they did not belong—by age 13.

My interior distance from the faith I was outwardly practicing was known only to me, until I voiced it to my mom—telling her I did not intend to be confirmed since such a commitment should not be lightly undertaken.

Simone Weil is perhaps the better case-in-point than a 13-year-old-Ellen. She was devoted to but never a *member* of the Catholic Church. She felt her role was on the periphery—in the liminal space of the doorway, where she could still reach those who the Church could or would not minister to because they could or would not walk through the doors.

Who else are not members? Some of the holiest people I know, in fact. My siblings. Those plagued by doubts. The ones who have suffered and have not been comforted. Those who have asked questions and been met with suspicion. We can see in the data I presented just a few minutes ago that young people who may find themselves "outside" institutional membership to religion are still practicing, believing, or attending in extremely meaningful ways. Incredibly, even while rates of disaffiliation grow, young people report that their "sense of faith" is increasing. Their feeling of closeness with a higher power is increasing. They have added more sacred practices to their lives—things like prayer, meditation, and reading—even during the disruptive time of the pandemic.

To invert this question of *who are not members*, I want to ask: who *are* the members? Who are the church's young members today? Two groups may come to mind in response to this question: those who are interested in very traditional and conservative forms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and those with a more liberal temperament. I am not sure whether these two camps are as large as they are loud. And more important than what they may have at odds in terms of issues and concerns, they have much more in common: a devotion to the church, a desire to see the Church become what it should be, and a sense of belonging, purpose, and identity within this institution.

So those who outwardly appear to be members in good standing may not be, and those who claim no affiliation with a particular religious tradition may, in fact, behave like ideal members. Practicing members may be at odds with each other or at odds with any given teaching, interpretation, or local leader. Which is why, to reiterate: membership status alone is not a meaningful metric for grasping a person's sense of faith.

And this fact should matter very much to those gathered here.

Because, to state the obvious, membership *within* the Church is the primary qualification for the kind of intra-church dialogue championed by this initiative.

Because, to state the obvious: it is only those who remain in the church who are able to dialogue about the things that divide us within it. And there are many, estranged from the faith, who cannot or will not remain long enough to enjoy the privilege of being at home in this church, even amid polarized and polarizing opinions.

Those of us gathered are the lucky ones: we have not slipped out the back. We have dug our heels in—and we've dug in because we believe there is something here worthwhile. Something quite true, and right, and good. We've experienced belonging or belief or community or grace in ways that cannot be undermined by disagreement with the fellow down the pew. We have been convinced that the church is capacious enough for all our disagreement, that it is broad enough for our varied spiritualities, that it is strong enough to bear our doubts, and that it is important enough to undertake the hard but imperative work of dialogue, *so that we may be one*.

Let me say this again: those of us gathered here are the lucky ones: We are at the table, where the dialogue about what divides us can take place. Many others have not made it to the table. They have left before dialogue can begin. They have been silenced before a conversation could start.

Which brings us to the second consideration within this narrow view: When people of good will leave, it must be received as a witness to the Church.

I had a good friend in graduate school. She was born and raised Catholic, and she loved the Church with incredible ardor and sincerity. She also felt an unmistakable call to preach. Her call was from God—she prayed that it be removed, prayed for an outlet that would permit her preaching without betraying the teachings of the church; prayed for the church to change those teachings. But after years of prayer and discernment, with a clear invitation to the priestly life, she discerned a departure from the church that had nurtured her for more than two decades.

I remember the moment she told me. We met for lunch at a café. She didn't waste time getting to the point, and the way she told me, through tears, was like a confession. She didn't want to leave. She wanted a way to stay and say yes to her calling. She wanted a life of service in *this* church, in *this* way. She needed me to witness her reluctant departure, as if I could offer absolution, as if there was something to absolve.

I can tell the story of this friend. I can tell the story of my siblings, whose wounds were reopened when, at my brother's funeral, the Catholic priest passed public and scornful judgment on his life. I can tell the story of a young woman who attended the camp where I was counselor, who was so afraid of coming out as gay that she made herself sick with every physical and spiritual disease rather than risk losing the relationships she felt were hanging precariously by the thread of being straight. And I'll be the first to admit that I cannot even begin to tell the stories of the

Brown, Black, Latino/a, Asian, and Indigenous communities who have been systematically marginalized, abused, and disregarded by the Church.

When people of good will experience alienation—when they experience a lack of belonging, an inability to be heard or even have a voice—we must receive their departure as a witness to the church. *This* is their contribution to the conversation about what divides us. They tell us the story of the moments the Church has not lived up to its vocation. The alienation, isolation, and loneliness of today's young people—and the fact that they *do not turn to the Church* as a solution to their sense of aloneness—should humble the Body of Christ. Young people, like all people, are searching for purpose, justice, community, a right path, a sense of belonging. That they do not find it here—or even think to look—is a stinging indictment. That they may attempt to belong here and find that they are not welcome is even worse.

Prophetically, throughout Common Ground's documents there is the clarion call to attend to both polarization *and* alienation. In the CCGI document "Parish: Holy Ground, Common Ground," Philip Murnion writes that we "see the urgency of dialogue for overcoming *alienation* as much as or more than *polarization*. The challenge… is not so often competing camps with ideological differences, but estrangement of people who, justifiably or not, feel that their voices are not heard in the community of the church."

I would like to offer the possibility that **polarization** has been the defining experience of US Catholics for the past 50 years, but that **alienation** is the defining experience of young people—those inside and outside the church—today.

Here we approach the last two vantage points of this 360-degree exploration. The historical and the current.

Historically, I suggested above that about fifty years of American Catholicism has been defined by polarization. I'm taking CCGI's cue on this one. I think the first of those 20 or 25 years were marked by what I'll call *productive* polarization—issues on the table that needed to be explored in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. In recent years, the polarization shifted from productive to paralyzing. No doubt this is correlated to increasingly gridlocked political polarization.

For nearly three decades—across seasons of productive disagreement and seasons of stalemates—this initiative has brought Catholics of varying stripes to the table for sustained, charitable, and important dialogue, working to lessen polarities and divisions that weaken the communion of the church. "Called to be Catholic," the charter statement for CCGI released in 1996, could very well be written today:

> "It is widely admitted that the Catholic Church in the United States has entered a time of peril. Many of its leaders, both clerical and lay, feel under siege and increasingly polarized. Many of its faithful, particularly its young people, feel disenfranchised,

confused about their beliefs, and increasingly adrift. Many of its institutions feel uncertain of their identity and increasingly fearful about their future."

When this document was written, key issues—those most fraught and most polarizing—were outlined as examples of what kinds of topics needed to be addressed in fruitful dialogue. Here is a list of those mentioned**.** Don't feel the need to read all these items; I copied them here from the founding document "Called to be Catholic" but just want to present it so you can see it at a quick glance.

The role of women in the church, the meaning of human sexuality, the church's presence in political life. None of these topics are resolved, despite nearly 50 years of insistent conversation on the matters. Indeed, you could flip through any old issue of Commonweal and see these concerns reflected in every decade. As long as there are impassioned faithful who find a home in the church, there will be division about how best to encourage the church to live up to its vocation. And as long as there is division in the church, there will be a need for sustained and charitable dialogue that builds bridges toward understanding. That this charter could have been written yesterday rather than three decades ago underscores these ongoing realities.

But now let me move us from the historical view of the last half a century, to the present.

I suspect I would have done my job in this lecture, and perhaps done it better than I'm opting to, if I simply offered to update this list with the values and topics that are most pressing to *today's* young people. Actually, sure—you know what? I'll do that. These lists are discoverable from

various research groups: we can fire them off easily: young people care about immigration, climate change, racial justice, economic inequality, LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, disability rights, gun reform. And in addition to valuing these things greatly, most young people don't think religious organizations seem to care about these same topics to the extent that they should. This graphic indicates not only what young people say they care about, but how much they perceive religious institutions as caring about the same issues.

But simply proposing a new list of relatively fraught and complex topics around which to host dialogue isn't what I think will ultimately help forge common ground across generations. Because young people who do not see these topics handled well—or handled at all—by the church aren't coming to the table for dialogue. They've already slipped out the back. They left or, increasingly, they were never here. Polarization is a sign that impassioned people remain in the church and want what is best for it. Polarization is a sign that the church is relevant enough to fight for. But widespread alienation and estrangement from the faith will eclipse any chance we have for dialogue around even the most polarizing issues.

I'd like to take this chance right now to pause. I am going to ask you to think for two minutes, then share for two minutes. I'll give you your prompt shortly. So you've been warned.

There's no doubt about the fact that the need for dialogue is more urgent than ever. But the way to undertake it must be responsive to new contextual realities in the landscape of American Catholicism. I have attempted to put forth several of these realities throughout this lecture: a lack of institutional trust, a disinterest in organized religion even while a desire for religious and

spiritual practices, communities, and belief abound; the modern obsession with membership that serves only to distract from the problem of alienation; a litany of social, political, and theological issues that are pressing for young people but largely ignored or handled inadequately by religious traditions. I offer these contextual realities and concerns as the backdrop for the significant listening and sharing that will take place throughout this weekend.

But I'd like to kick off just a bit of that thinking and sharing right now.

Let me ask you: do these realities, as I've described them, reflect *your experience of the church?* Have I glimpsed your story? Have I tiptoed up to the wounds or worries, the hopes or joys that help you plant your feet deeply in this soil?

What is still missing?
Who is still missing?

These are not rhetorical questions. I cannot give a 360-degree view of the church through the eyes of young Catholics when I am only one young (or young-ish) Catholic amid many. I would love to hear from even just a few of the people here tonight: what is missing in this brief sketch of the landscape of young Catholics in the American church?

[Pause for 2-3 comments]

[Whether or not folks got involved] – Thank you for taking the time to reflect on this prompt. I hope the conversations that unfold in the coming days will continue to fill in this preliminary sketch.

And now I have a fifth, and concluding, vantage point. It's a bit unfair, I know, but I'd be remiss not to name it.

There is, finally, the spiritual perspective.

If you take nothing else away from these remarks, I hope you will hear me say this loud and clear. The Holy Spirit is always creative. There is no need to fret.

There is no doubt in my mind that every generation has perceived its own woes and worries as the pinnacle of peril. That's not to belittle real suffering, but to offer a spiritual gloss, maybe even an eschatological one: *this* is the work of our generation, of the generations of Catholics in this room. This is the work before us to do. Polarization and alienation threaten the church; new issues emerge daily that demand the slow work of listening and sharing—trusting our dialogue partners to tell the truth, and trusting them enough to tell it ourselves. How lucky we are to dig in our heels and roll up our sleeves at the task of addressing these issues with the ever-creative Holy Spirit guiding our work.

In this address, I have hoped to begin outlining what some of the contexts and concerns are for young Catholics as they relate to the church. Looking at the broad view, I've demonstrated that there is general institutional distrust, high rates of disaffiliation, and novel—maybe unrecognizable—ways of expressing one's religious identity, beliefs, or practices. From the narrow vantage point, I have offered vignettes that make clear the insufficiency of membership as meaningful barometer for religious faith, and have insisted that those outside the church—especially those who actively left—are to be received as witnesses whose absence from our table is itself a contribution to the dialogue we hope to undertake. With a view of recent history, I have suggested that polarization has defined the church experience for the last 50 years, but that alienation defines it for young people today. I have proposed an updated list of topics ripe for dialogue, but I've also suggested that a list of topics alone may not be enough to produce the dialogue this group has long championed. I have asked you to think with me about how the church relates to young people, and young people to the church, filling in the gaps in my own perception. I have, I think, successfully turned the tables on Steve, who gave me a huge task, because now the bigger task lies with him—and all of you at CCGI—to move forward.

I thank you for your time and attention this evening.

With the time that remains, I'd love to open up the conversation to the thoughts, questions, and concerns of others—including those online who may be wishing to chime in.