

Going, Going, Gone

The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics

A Study by Saint Mary's Press of Minnesota, Inc., Winona, MN

In collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA),
Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

September 2017



saint mary's press

© 2017. Saint Mary's Press, Winona, Minnesota USA. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without written permission of the publisher. An exception is in the case of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or public media where permission is specifically granted by the publisher.

Content design and manufacturing were coordinated by the passionate team of creatives at Saint Mary's Press.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, in collaboration with Saint Mary's Press and GfK Custom Research/Knowledge Networks, designed and conducted the qualitative study and personal interviews, including selection of sample, data collection, and data analysis. Dr. Richard Morehouse, PhD, designed and directed the qualitative analysis by a national research project team. Robert J. McCarty and John M. Vitek served as principal authors of the final manuscript. All authors and the national project team approved the final manuscript. Saint Mary's Press provided funding for the study, as well as editorial and publication services.

Principal Authors:

Robert J. McCarty, DMin
John M. Vitek, MA

Critical Reviewers:

Richard Morehouse, PhD
Frank Mercadante, MA
Katherine Angulo, MA

Editor:

Jerry Ruff

**Center for Applied Research
in the Apostolate (CARA)**

Research Team:

Mark M. Gray, PhD
Jonathon L. Wiggins, PhD
Felice Goodwin

**Qualitative Analysis Research
and Project Oversight Team:**

Armand Alcazar, FSC, PhD
Katherine Angulo, MA
Dorie Vaughn Beres, PhD
Maura Hagarty, PhD
Robert J. McCarty, DMin
Richard Morehouse, PhD
Frank Mercadante, MA
John M. Vitek, MA

**Principal Qualitative Research
Analysis Consultant:**

Richard Morehouse, PhD

5926

ISBN 978-1-59982-982-1

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Purpose of Qualitative Study	7
Study Limitations.	9
Executive Summary	11
Three Preliminary Categories of Disaffiliation	13
The Injured	14
The Drifters.	18
The Dissenters.	21
Six Common Dynamics of Disaffiliation	25
Initial Observations	32
Implications and Questions for Pastoral Ministry	34
Appendix A: Research Method and Process.	37
Appendix B: Major Findings of Quantitative Survey.	41
Appendix C: Survey Questionnaire	44
Appendix D: Open-Ended Question Responses (Unedited)	50
Appendix E: Demographics of Formerly Catholic Teens and Young Adults.	65
Research Presentation and Media Inquiries	78

Introduction

Though the Catholic population of the United States has grown year to year along with the general population, studies indicate that more people who were raised Catholic—often young people—are leaving the faith than ever before. Of all the major denominations, Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses as a result of affiliation changes, despite these losses having been largely offset by Hispanic immigration to the United States. The Catholic decline is best understood in the context of the broader changes in religious affiliation across all religions in the United States.

The Pew Research Center reports, in their study “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” (2015), that “the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated has jumped more than six points, from 16.1 percent [in 2007] to 22.8 percent [in 2014]” of the US population. In real numbers, Pew estimates that between 2007 and 2014 there has been an increase of about 19 million religiously unaffiliated adults—also known as the “Nones”—in the United States, bringing the total number of religiously unaffiliated adults in the United States to approximately 56 million. Pew further reports that the generation with the highest religious unaffiliation are the “young millennials” (ages 18–24), at 36 percent religiously unaffiliated, followed by the “older millennials” (ages 25–33), at 34 percent. (<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>)

The fact that young people are leaving their faith is neither unique to Catholicism nor surprising in this larger context of “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.” But

The purpose of this study is to understand more fully why young people leave the Catholic Church in particular.

our interest, and the purpose of this study, is to understand more fully *why* young people leave the Catholic Church in particular. For the purpose of this study, we were interested in surveying and interviewing youth and young adults (ages 15 to 25) who once self-identified as Catholic, but no longer do so. We use the term “disaffiliated” to describe this population that for various reasons no longer consider themselves Catholic. From our sample, we can estimate that approximately 12.8 percent of US young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 are former Catholics, and that approximately 6.8 percent of US teens between the ages of 15 and 17 are former Catholics.

In July 2015, Saint Mary’s Press (SMP) commissioned the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University to conduct a study of teens and young adults who were raised Catholic, but have left the Catholic faith (disaffiliated). CARA first conducted a national survey of former Catholics, ages 15 to 25. The initial quantitative approach ensured the maximum degree of representativeness possible for a second qualitative stage of the project where in-depth personal interviews were conducted with fifteen survey participants.

In October 2016, Saint Mary’s Press convened a national research project team that undertook in-depth qualitative data analysis. The goal was to support and/or expand the quantitative findings by identifying underlying dynamics that impact disaffiliation. In qualitative analysis the categories emerge from the quantitative data; they are not imposed as a result of the quantitative results. Thus, qualitative analysis provides “storied” data that goes beyond the statistical data represented in bar graphs, pie charts, and data tables. Rather, qualitative analysis yields textured and nuanced personal narratives or life stories that more fully reveal the dynamics of disaffiliation.

Qualitative analysis yields textured and nuanced personal narratives or life stories that more fully reveal the dynamics of disaffiliation.

That said, the quantitative study did reveal some important underlying statistics (see Appendices B and E). Increasingly, young Catholics are weakly attached to the Church. Of those who have disaffiliated, more than six in ten have celebrated First Communion, but only a third have been confirmed. A majority attended Mass a few times a year or less often when they identified as Catholic, two-thirds were never enrolled in a Catholic religious institution (Catholic schools), and six in ten never participated in any parish religious education or youth ministry program.

When asked at what age they no longer identified themselves as Catholic, 74 percent of the sample said between the ages of 10 and 20, with the median age being 13 years old. Of those who have left, 35 percent no longer belong to any religion, while 46 percent have joined another religion. An additional 14 percent report being atheists or agnostics.

Purpose of Qualitative Study

A qualitative study was undertaken for two reasons. First, we desired to hear the life stories, the reasons for disaffiliating from the Church, in youth and young adults' own words—directly, candidly, and without filter. Qualitative research has illuminated the richness, complexity, textures, and nuance of the reasons for disaffiliation. Second, we desired to highlight that behind every life story is a person—a unique individual—with a name who desires to have their story heard.

For example, Rachel, like so many of the young people interviewed, when asked if we could interview her about young adults and their disaffiliation from the Church, said, “Finally!” And Edward, at the conclusion of the interview, said, “I’m glad to actually finally tell my story. I have never really sat down and told anyone. Thank you for listening.”

This study attempts to reveal the life stories of disaffiliated young people so that we as Church might develop empathy for and true understanding of the complex and varied realities of real people who have made a thoughtful, discerning, and often deeply reflective choice—a choice typically not made in haste or lightly. More important, the study illuminates the reality that behind every life story is a “name.” To listen and to hear the stories of those who disaffiliate from the Church are essential and constitutive dimensions of what it means to be a community of faith. The dynamics of disaffiliation can’t be sufficiently understood when limited to statistics rendered on bar graphs, or generalized, categorized groupings. Each person who disaffiliates has a name, a story, and longings of the heart and mind, and all are grateful for the opportunity to have their story heard.

We desired to hear the life stories, the reasons for disaffiliating from the Church, in youth and young adults' own words.

To listen and to hear the stories of those who disaffiliate from the Church are essential and constitutive dimensions of what it means to be a community of faith.

Andrea Syverson, in her spiritual memoir *Alter Girl* (Group Publishing, 2017), describes her religious journey. Born and raised a devout Catholic, her story parallels many of those that emerged in our interviews. She loved being Catholic throughout her childhood and into her young adult years, but little by little the discrepancies that emerged between her Catholic belief and what she experienced in her life couldn't be resolved, and one day she made the choice to leave the Catholic Church behind in search of 'something more.' Like many who leave the Church, Andrea did so only after feeling "defeated and crushed, alone, confused, mad, and sad." The saddest moment of all, Andrea reports, was remembering how she felt "as if no one cared that [she] left."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, an international religious leader and philosopher who is deeply interested in the role of post-modern religion, notes that all persons long for connection in a generative community. "Community," he notes, is that place "where they know who you are and where they miss you when you are gone." (Charles Taylor and Jonathan Sacks on "The Future of Religion," February 10, 2012, *YouTube.com*, *tvochannel*)

The authors of this paper think there are two critical questions to ask ourselves as pastoral leaders as we consider the life stories of those who have disaffiliated from the Church:

- Do we know who they are—the depth of their life stories—do we know them by name?
- Do we miss these individuals now that they are gone?

Study Limitations

This research was specifically focused on young people who previously self-identified as Catholic, but no longer do so. In the course of analyzing the survey data and the interviews it became obvious that several related issues need further consideration, issues beyond the scope of this project. These issues include the following:

- The Hispanic reality. This research could not include in its analysis the impact of the multigenerational immigrant experience in the Catholic Church. This arena needs specific focus to fully understand the relationship between disaffiliation and the immigrant experience.
- “Sorta-Catholics.” In the course of anecdotal conversations with young adult Catholics about our research findings, we often heard the phrase, “I am sorta-Catholic.” These young people are not disaffiliated—yet. However, they describe themselves as on the margins of the Church.
- The “almost-done” Catholics. A new descriptor in the research of Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope (Church Refugees, Group Publishing, 2015) identifies a significant percentage of people who remain affiliated with their church but are on the brink of being “done”—hence, the “almost-done” descriptor that suggests a large number of people still in our churches are close to being “done.” While our study focused on those who have already disaffiliated (“done”), we believe there is a significant number of people who still self-identify as Catholic, who were raised in the Catholic Church and engaged in the

Church over a significant period of time, but who have reached a point where they are close to saying they can no longer maintain identification or involvement with the Church and would consider themselves “done with Church.”

- The “engaged Catholics.” The statistics remind us that many young people do maintain their Catholic identity well into their young adult years. It would be worthwhile to identify the characteristics and the contributing factors that foster a strong Catholic identity in emerging adults.
- There is a larger social, cultural, historical setting that influences the lives of youth and their faith story that this study of necessity could not address. However, if the goal is to “know who they are” then this broader frame would help all readers/users of the study to understand these individuals.

These areas of further research would combine to provide a more comprehensive picture of Catholic Church membership in the United States.