

2021

The State of Religion & Young People

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY

CATHOLIC EDITION

Springtide
RESEARCH INSTITUTE



2021

The State of Religion & Young People

**NAVIGATING
UNCERTAINTY**

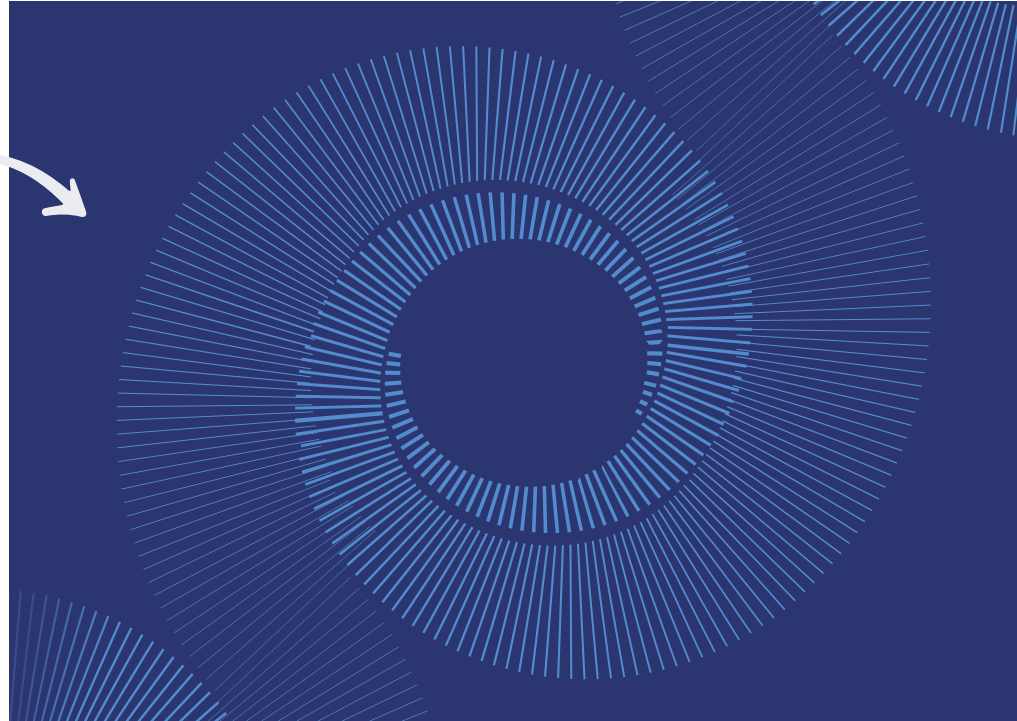
CATHOLIC EDITION

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A note about the cover:

The cover illustrates the feeling of “spiraling” we often colloquially associate with experiences of uncertainty or doubt in life. But for young people, these uncertainties—these spirals—do not indicate doom or dread; they are, like our cover, just the backdrop to daily life. In addition to a symbol of uncertainty, we were inspired by the way spirals represent a kind of unbounded circle. A spiral moves away from its initial, closed form as a circle and toward a freer structure, one that nonetheless takes inspiration from that original shape. It echoes the way young people increasingly resist closed systems of meaning for something more free-flowing and organic. In short, the spiral reminds us of what we call “Faith Unbundled,” a new way of thinking about this generation’s approach to faith that includes making space for variation, personalization, and uncertainty as they journey through their lives.



RESOURCES

All the resources referenced in numbered marginal notes throughout this Catholic edition are compiled in a list both at the end of this book and at springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources. These resources include podcasts and blog posts from young people, conversations Springtide is having with outside experts, deep dives with Dr. Josh Packard, and more.



Mission

Compelled by the urgent desire to listen and attend to the lives of young people (ages 13 to 25), Springtide Research Institute is committed to understanding the distinct ways new generations experience and express community, identity, and meaning.

We exist at the intersection of religious and human experience in the lives of young people. And we're here to listen.

We combine quantitative and qualitative research to reflect and amplify the lived realities of young people as they navigate shifting social, cultural, and religious landscapes. Delivering fresh data and actionable insights, we equip those who care about young people to care better.



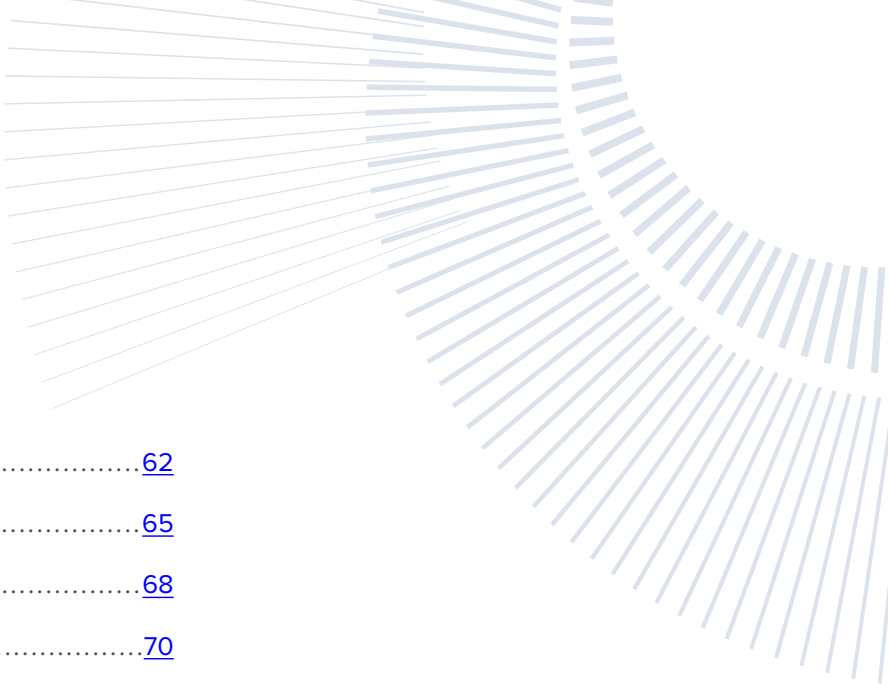
Contents

Foreword by Katherine Angulo V.	8
From Springtide’s Executive Director	10
Introduction	12

Part I: Navigating Uncertainty

Facing Life’s Biggest Questions	20
A Catholic Look: Exploring Effective Ministries for Young Catholic Latines	22
A Closer Look: COVID-19	28
A Closer Look: The Disconnect	32
Key Findings: What Young People Are Telling Us	38
Young People & Uncertainty	42
Religious Identity & Uncertainty	44
Religious Beliefs & Uncertainty	48
Religious Practices & Uncertainty	50
Relationships & Uncertainty	54
A Catholic Look	56
Takeaways & Insights	58





Part II: Faith Unbundled

- What Is Faith Unbundled? [62](#)
- A Closer Look: Unbundling & the Role of Religion [65](#)
- The Hallmarks of Faith Unbundled [68](#)
 - Curiosity [70](#)
(with insights from Dr. Natalia Imperatori-Lee)
 - Wholeness [76](#)
(with insights from Steven Ellair)
 - Connection [82](#)
(with insights from Br. Armand Alcazar, FSC, PhD)
 - Flexibility [88](#)
(with insights from Becca Meagher)
- A Catholic Look: Concluding Thoughts on Uncertainty & Unbundling [94](#)

- Conclusion** [96](#)
- Appendix: Research Methodology [98](#)
- Acknowledgments [100](#)
- Resources Listed throughout the Report [102](#)

Now is a time for generosity and creativity. If we're willing to listen, young people's faith can guide us to new ministries that we never expected.

—Katherine Angulo V.

Foreword

What are you discussing as you walk along?

This is the question Jesus poses to the two men on the road to Emmaus.

The State of Religion & Young People 2021, Catholic Edition: Navigating Uncertainty makes clear that young people desire to be listened to. And if we look to Jesus' example on the road to Emmaus, we see that listening can be the beginning of our ministry too.

Christ's model in this story is what young people say they need. In fact, this report makes clear that what they say helps most when going through a difficult time is not advice, answers, or apologetics—it's the presence of someone who *cares to listen*.

Like Jesus' listening on the road, our listening as teachers and ministers must take place on the roads young people are traveling. We must go out to them. We must ask questions first, and then we must be prepared to answer the questions young people will inevitably ask us: *Why do you stay? Why do you still believe?*

When I receive these questions, I have the chance to convey my joy, my gratitude, my sense of service, my sense of fulfillment. I can share the history of God's action in my life—not just salvation history, but family history, the stories of my community, and the ways God is alive.

This report provides clues about why young people don't stay or join or believe. We see that young people feel their doubt is not welcome in places of faith. We see that they don't feel free to ask questions, despite having so many. And every Catholic contributor to this edition—particularly in reflecting on the hallmarks of Faith Unbundled—emphasizes the need to create spaces where doubt or questions or curiosity are not treated as threats to faith but as opportunities to rediscover the richness of our faith. The need is urgent.

It is urgent for young people *and* for us, as ministers and leaders. To refuse to go out of our spaces *and into their spaces* is to risk undermining our calling. Catholics are called to live their faith outside the walls of churches. The COVID-19 pandemic has made responding to this call more urgent than ever.

I know Catholic ministers feel exhausted today. Many are struggling in the face of declining religious affiliation, a lack of resources, and burnout. But these realities are not unique to Catholics. And it is in the hardest moments—which is the kind of moment we are in right now—that saints emerge.

Young people need something new. Now is not the time to keep doing things as usual. It's the time to talk about what young people need to talk about.

We are not here to “win” their membership; this is not a competition. These are their hearts and their lives—and ours. This is our calling. We need a sincere intent to get messy, to walk with them, and to share with them openly how God has touched our hearts.

Now is a time for generosity and creativity. If we're willing to listen, young people's faith can guide us to new ministries that we never expected.

We can begin by asking, ***What are you discussing as you walk along?***



Katherine Angulo V. is the Program Director of the Thriving in Ministry Initiative at the McGrath Institute at the University of Notre Dame, where she works to prepare pastoral leaders for long-term ministry in the Church and directs the Bishop John M. D'Arcy Program in Priestly Renewal. Born in Mexico and raised in Colombia, Katherine has a bachelor's degree in modern languages and a master's degree in pastoral ministries. Before coming to the McGrath Institute, she spent more than two decades in youth ministry, including serving as the Associate Director of Youth Ministry at the Office of Formation and Discipleship for the Archdiocese of Atlanta for four years.

From Springtide's Executive Director

In the 2020 article “Science Explains Why Uncertainty Is So Hard on Our Brains,” Markham Heid discusses the science behind uncertainty, explaining that it is at the source of anxiety disorders and panic attacks and may even be the basis of fear. Heid interviews psychologist Jack Nitschke who puts it plainly: “Uncertainty lays the groundwork for anxiety because anxiety is always future-oriented.”

Uncertainty and change are hallmarks of being young—so much lies ahead, so many decisions are faced for the first time—but this past year has brought unprecedented challenges. Uncertainty has been the air we breathe. For young people, the already-uncertain aspects of life have been amplified. Heid notes that “uncertainty acts like rocket fuel for worry; it causes people to see threats everywhere they look, and . . . it makes them more likely to react emotionally in response to those threats.”

At Springtide, we listen to young people, ages 13 to 25, and amplify their voices through quantitative and qualitative sociological research. This year we knew we had to focus on uncertainty, including the role it plays in faith

and the ways and extent to which young people dealing with uncertainty or difficulty turn to faith or religion. **This special edition of *The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty* highlights the stories, voices, and data of Catholic young people and compares this demographic with the general population of young people Springtide reported on in the original edition of this report.** So who do young people, including Catholic young people, turn to in times of stress or difficulty?

Spoiler alert: Young people in general aren't turning to religion, at least not in the traditional sense. But the majority of young people nonetheless tell us they are religious. And our data suggest good news: Religious young people are faring better than the nonreligious in all aspects of their well-being, including when navigating uncertainty.

And although the majority of all young people Springtide surveyed consider themselves at least slightly religious (71%) or spiritual (78%), most of the general population isn't turning to religious institutions in times of difficulty. This is despite the fact that these institutions across

the board have rituals, beliefs, practices, and communities that aim, in part, to help humans cope with uncertainty.

Why, at this highly uncertain time in history, are young people bypassing religious institutions for other ways of coping amid uncertainty? What is the reason for this disconnect, what can be done to bridge the divide, and how might communities (religious or not) adapt and grow to better serve the needs of today's young people?

Young people are increasingly less likely to be engaged with institutional forms of religious expression. Decades-long trends continue: for a large and growing segment of young people, religiosity is increasingly decoupled from institutions, even as they express high levels of religious belief, practice, and identity. This is true among young Catholics as well. Forty-four percent of young people who identify as Catholic also say they are not a member of a religious or spiritual community. Over 40% don't think they need a spiritual community at all.

Faith Unbundled, a concept we explore in this report, describes the way young people are constructing the elements of faith by turning to many religious and nonreligious sources. For the original report, we asked expert practitioners—religious, secular, and

spiritual—committed to the flourishing of young people to weigh in on best practices for supporting this emerging, unbundled path of religious exploration. For this special edition, we've added commentary from four Catholic practitioners.

The State of Religion & Young People 2021, Catholic Edition: Navigating Uncertainty explores reasons for the disconnect between young people and religious institutions in times of uncertainty. A lot has shifted in the religious, cultural, and social landscape. We have studied the landscape, listened closely to the experiences of young people, and integrated the perspectives of practitioners.

One thing is abundantly clear. This youngest generation, Gen Z, is pressing forward, exploring the boundaries of their faith, constructing meaning, navigating uncertainty, and encountering the divine in new ways. The only question that remains is whether you'll be there to guide them.



Josh Packard, PhD

As you read, connect with us [@WeAreSpringtide](#) on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, sign up for our e-newsletter at springtideresearch.org, or send us an email to let us know how you're helping young people navigate uncertainty.





Introduction

Welcome to *The State of Religion & Young People 2021, Catholic Edition: Navigating Uncertainty*.

This Catholic edition builds on *The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty*, a report based on a full year of research, over 10,000 surveys featuring questions about all young people's beliefs, practices, behaviors, relationships, and this year's focus: ways young people are navigating uncertainty. In addition to surveying, we conducted qualitative interviews with young people along the same themes, listening for the nuance that emerges only through conversation. In the Catholic edition, we highlight the voices, stories, and data representing Catholic young people ages 13 to 25, as well as the contributions of experts and practitioners who offer their wisdom on the care of young Catholics.

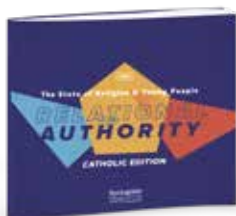
Our passion for listening to young people extends beyond quantitative and qualitative research. We invite more young people to participate in our work and weigh in on our research. Our Springtide Ambassadors Program brings a cohort of young people together with the Springtide team to discuss their lived experience in light of reports, to formulate research questions, to interpret and discuss data, and to provide insight, often in unforeseen ways, through wide-ranging conversations.

To learn more about our research methodology, turn to page 98 in the appendix of this report.

METHODOLOGY

We release a season of our *Voices of Young People Podcast* to augment each report with reflections from young people. Finally, Springtide interns, who serve in many areas—research, publicity, publishing, and community engagement—help us assess our work as an institute, and they contribute their own insights and wisdom to this endeavor. This combination of data and lived experiences enriches everything you read from Springtide.

Last year we published the first of these reports, *The State of Religion & Young People 2020: Relational Authority*, and shortly after, we released the Catholic edition of that 2020 report. In those reports, we introduced the concept of Relational Authority, a framework for building bonds of trust amid new cultural, social, and religious realities. We recognize the continued importance of this framework, especially the need for adults in the lives of young people to practice integrity, transparency, listening, care, and expertise in a year in which so many young people expressed broken trust, political polarization, a sense of isolation, and more. The 2021 reports—the original and Catholic editions—build on that framework.



› Learn more about Relational Authority by downloading the free report at springtideresearch.org/research/the-state-of-religion-young-catholics.

After the turmoil and tensions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd and the global protests that followed, and the lead-up and aftermath of the 2020 US presidential election (to name a few issues), Springtide knew there was a need for a better understanding about how young people, including Catholic young people, navigate and cope with uncertainty. How can trusted adults—including ministers, teachers, diocesan leaders, and parents—support young people during times of uncertainty, whether that uncertainty is brief or long-term? Note that we say it's the trusted adults' role to *support*: not fix, not solve, not force certainty where uncertainty arises.

We highlight Springtide resources throughout this report—the kind that young people create and contribute to in podcasts and blog posts—as well as conversations we're having with outside experts, deep dives with Dr. Josh Packard, and more. All the resources referenced in numbered marginal notes throughout this report are compiled in a list both at the end of this book and at

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources.

RESOURCES

Over and over in our surveys, interviews, and even in our reading and conversations within the wider social sciences, we see that young people, even Catholic young people, aren't looking for quick fixes to complex issues. They don't necessarily expect immediate resolution or certainty. Colette, a young mother who identifies as Baptist, told Springtide how she responds to overwhelming, difficult, or uncertain experiences:



I like to shut everything off for a moment. So I'll either meditate, I'll do yoga, I'll listen to music, like self-care, maybe take a bath, or just go on a walk, anything to stop thinking about whatever stressed me out. I know that doesn't fix the problem, but it does help momentarily.

—Colette, 23



Watch Dr. Josh Packard and Ryan Burge discuss the “nones” of religion, and young people who are growing into religion.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources

WATCH

Like Colette, many young people don't feel the need to “fix the problem” immediately. Sometimes they just need to bear the problem, breathe deeply, or take a walk during a difficult time. A little over half (54%) of Catholic young people ages 13 to 25 tell us, “I am comfortable with not having all the answers.” Sometimes they are just trying to endure the uncertainty if it's not possible to escape or resolve it right away; often it's not. And for many young people, this insight is the first clue about *why* they don't turn to religion when navigating uncertain or difficult times:

52%	58%
of young Catholics ages 13 to 25 told us,	of young people ages 13 to 25 told us,

“I do not like to be told answers about faith and religion; I'd rather discover my own answers.”

48%	54%
of young Catholics ages 13 to 25 told us,	of young people ages 13 to 25 told us,

“Religious communities try to fix my problem, instead of just being there for me.”

They aren't looking for a solution to uncertainty, which is not only a fact of life but also a fact of adolescence and young adulthood, as well as a vivid fact of our current cultural moment. Young people are looking for relationships built on presence and listening, not advice and fixing. About half of young people (51% of all young people surveyed and 47% of the Catholics surveyed) told us that the most useful or important thing a person did to help them during uncertainty was to “just let [them] talk.” Ally, a high school senior and a nondenominational Christian, has several adults she can talk to. At the heart of these relationships is wholehearted trust:

I talked to my mom about it. I talked to my therapist. I talked to my college counselor and some advisors at my school that I trust wholeheartedly. I just, I try to talk to people who I know have the best interest for me when it comes to, like, my future, because sometimes making decisions by yourself is hard. With these kinds of decisions, no one can make them for me, but I like having feedback from others who care.

—Ally, 17

Instead of people who make the decision for them, young people look for people with whom they can discuss big decisions and feel empowered to make the right one. Instead of solutions, they look for relationships with people who will see them through to the other side of uncertainty, whatever that other side looks like.

Religious leaders often already know what this kind of presence amid uncertainty can and does look like: think of the ministry of accompaniment in the Christian tradition, the work of Muslim chaplains in hospital, university, or military settings, or the Jewish practice of sitting shiva with the bereaved. These types of rituals or practices are embedded deep within all kinds of traditions. Often they just need to be accessed and offered in new ways. On page 22, we highlight an innovative approach to campus ministry called culturally informed ministry, as just one example of many ways Catholics are taking seriously this practice of presence—and the ways they are meeting Gen Z where they're at in their spiritual journeys.

To be effective, trusted guides will do well to understand and honor the new ways Gen Z is navigating questions of uncertainty, specifically the way many young people's religious seeking is unbundled.

3

Watch Dr. Josh Packard explain why a sociological approach is needed to navigate religious identity among young people.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources

WATCH

A CLOSER LOOK

In this report, you'll find three special features, called "A Closer Look," that dive deeper into young people's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disconnect between religious institutions and young people, and some thinkers' engagement with the concept of an "unbundled" faith.

A CATHOLIC LOOK

Throughout this Catholic edition, you'll find data, voices, stories, and insights from Catholic young people as well as Catholic practitioners and experts.

In Part I of *The State of Religion & Young People 2021, Catholic Edition*

we explore the disconnect between young people and religious institutions, even amid times of uncertainty. This means investigating the experience of uncertainty *and* the ways young people, even Catholic young people, are already responding to those experiences. In order to better understand this disconnect, we look at the reasons young people report *not* turning to religious institutions during difficult times, and also examples of the times they *do* depend on their religious faith, communities, identity, or practices. **Throughout Part 1, we report data from young people in general as well as Catholics in particular, out of which a portrait emerges of a new type of faith, one that is not bound to one tradition or institution or community but is unbundled.**

In Part II, we explore Faith Unbundled: what it is, how it relates to uncertainty, and why it matters for religious leaders today. *Curiosity*, *wholeness*, *connection*, and *flexibility* are the hallmarks of Faith Unbundled—that is, they are the qualities that guide how young people, even Catholic young people, are pursuing and discerning religious questions.

Part II presents reflections from experts who witness and respond to Faith Unbundled in their own contexts:

CURIOSITY

Insights from Rev. Sumi Loundon Kim
A Catholic Look from Dr. Natalia Imperatori-Lee

WHOLENESS

Insights from Nima Dahir
A Catholic Look from Steven Ellair

CONNECTION

Insights from Chris Stedman
A Catholic Look from Br. Armand Alcazar, FSC, PhD

FLEXIBILITY

Insights from Rabbi Joshua Stanton
A Catholic Look from Becca Meager

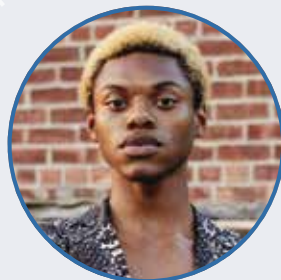
Each of these eight experts offers insights rooted in expertise and experience about how best to serve young people in light of this emerging spirituality.

Season 5: *The Voices of Young People Podcast*

Season 5 of *The Voices of Young People Podcast* features ten young people, more than half with Catholic backgrounds, telling us about their experiences of faith, doubt, and uncertainty. Listen to the episodes at springtideresearch.org/podcast.



Abby, 24, Michigan



Amethyst, 23, Illinois



Christian, 22, Pennsylvania



Daniel, 22, North Carolina



Elyse, 15, Massachusetts



Josué, 25, California



Lily, 15, Minnesota



Lucy, 21, Pennsylvania



Saad, 26, Illinois



Zaina, 16, Massachusetts

In this season, we invited young people to tell us what “faith” means to them, including why or whether they would use that term to describe their inner life. We asked where they feel most connected to their center of meaning, why and how they’ve come to identify with this faith or set of values, and the ways they’ve relied on it as they navigate life’s joys, difficulties, and uncertainties.



PART I

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY







Facing Life's Biggest Questions

Young people are facing some of life's biggest questions: Who am I? What should I do with my life? What commitments do I want to make now that could alter the course of my life: commitments to another person, a school program, a career path, a new city? Young people deal daily with questions about how and who to be, where and to what to belong, how and whether to believe—in Sikhism or socialism, Tik Tok influencers or media talking heads. They are perpetually navigating major decisions, and with each decision they are building the persons they will become. But even once a young person begins to feel settled about who they are or what they believe, they feel additional pressure about whether to show that to the world. Elsa, a young Hindu woman in her senior year of high school, offers an enlightening observation:

Everyone is just trying to live their lives to show a certain face out to the world, not who they truly are or their personality. They can be battling a million different things and nobody will know, and they don't want to show anyone because they want to keep a certain persona up to the entire world.

—Elsa, 18



Young Catholics mirror their peers in this regard. Many of the major questions they're asking have uncertainty at their heart. Indeed, adolescence and young adulthood are marked by transitions and changes, a perpetual state of not knowing what's next. This uncertainty was even more pronounced in the past year. As we wrote in *The New Normal: 8 Ways to Care for Gen Z in a Post-Pandemic World*: "For young people between the ages of 13 and 25, it's not uncommon for every year to be different from the next. There's no 'normal' to return to. [In 2020,] their world turned upside down just as they were starting to find their footing."

Elsa, the young woman quoted on the previous page, wonders if faith anchors other young people who might feel lost when navigating such major questions or feeling pressure to keep up a persona:

I feel like having a faith or having something that can ground them to earth and to the very ground that they're standing on can help them get through a lot of things. And if they really believe that doing something with their faith works, maybe it can help them get through a lot of dark times.

—Elsa, 18

But our data show that even though the majority of young people in general identify as religious (71%) or spiritual (78%), most aren't turning to religion—whether religious communities, leaders, practices, or beliefs—to help guide them in moments of uncertainty. This is true even of the young people who tell us they attend, believe in, or identify with a particular religious tradition. Of the young people in general who identified as "very religious," less than half (40%) told us they found connecting with their faith community helpful during challenging or uncertain times; only 23% of those who consider themselves moderately religious found this helpful. Only 1 in 5 young people in general agree with the statement "I use faith as a guide when I am confused about things."

4

Watch some of Springtide's ambassadors discuss returning to campus in the fall and what the pandemic has meant for them.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources

WATCH



87%

of young Catholics say they are **religious**.



85%

of young Catholics say they are **spiritual**.

ONLY 26%

of young Catholics agree with the statement "***I use faith as a guide when I am confused about things.***"

A CATHOLIC LOOK

Exploring Effective Ministries for Young Catholic Latines

Young Latines are increasing in both number and importance among Catholics in the United States. Sixteen million US-born Latine Catholics live in the United States currently. Among second-generation Latines, only 6% are Spanish-dominant when it comes to language. That number drops to virtually zero among third-generation Latines. This tells us that much like the rest of their Gen Z counterparts (the “most diverse” generation in history), Latine young people are greatly diverse as well—a reality that calls for an equally nuanced approach to ministry if their needs are to be met.

In 2021, Springtide undertook a joint project with John DeCostanza, Director of University Ministry at Dominican University, to better understand the needs of young Latine Catholics on college campuses. John and his team are pioneering an innovative approach to creating belonging, which they call *culturally informed ministry*. They asked us to help them understand any important cultural nuances that might show up in our *Noticed-Named-Known* framework for creating belonging, a framework we first uncovered and outlined in our 2020 report *Belonging: Reconnecting America’s Loneliest Generation*. A full report of our joint findings with Dominican University will be available in 2022, but we offer a sneak peek at three key insights here.

KEY INSIGHT—ONE

For young Latines, relating to others based on shared experiences and values fosters a greater sense of belonging than does shared ethnicity.

Predominantly Latine spaces can actually feel quite alienating, particularly for second-generation Latines who do not speak Spanish or do not strongly identify with their parents’ country of origin.

Young Latines feel more welcome in spaces comprised of people with similar experiences and values as them, rather than spaces comprised of people of the same ethnicity or race alone. For example, in our surveys and interviews, young people told us they feel welcome in second-generation spaces, regardless of the ethnicities represented in those spaces, because other second-generation young people can relate to their experiences of trying to speak their parents' native language, translating documents for their parents, and feeling “*ni de aquí ni de allá*” (“*neither from here nor from there*”), which is an experience common among second-generation young people, not unique to just young Latines.

Young Latines also feel more welcome in spaces made up of people with whom they are politically and socially aligned. For example, one interviewee, a 22-year-old student named Sara, stated that she didn't enjoy being in predominantly Latine spaces because she valued a greater diversity of perspectives. Yet she stated: “There is a line between having people from different backgrounds who respect each other and then having people from very contrasting backgrounds that clash. Those are also very difficult spaces to be in.” Many other participants echoed this sentiment, stating that more than shared ethnorace, shared social and political values are precursors to belonging.

KEY INSIGHT—TWO

Spaces intentionally created for young Latines by predominantly white leaders can feel symbolic rather than genuine when institutional support does not lead to substantive and meaningful change.

All the young Latines we interviewed reported experiencing prejudice or discrimination because of their ethnoracial identity. Because of that, they generally feel wary and weary of efforts by predominantly white leaders to serve Latine youth.

Season 6: *Latine Voices*

Season 6 of *The Voices of Young People Podcast* features five Latine young people. Listen to the episodes at springtideresearch.org/podcast.



**Blanca, 20,
California**



**Brian, 22,
California**



**Destina, 25,
Utah**



**Gabriela, 24,
California**



**Ryan, 22,
New York**



Enjoy this bonus season of our podcast with the release of *The State of Religion & Young People, Catholic Edition: Navigating Uncertainty*.

For example, Sara, the 22-year-old student quoted in Key Insight—one, stated: “If an institution tried to make things bilingual or speak Spanish, *I would wonder why*. If it was done at my school, where everyone is predominantly white and predominantly English-speaking, I would really question if there is a **demonstrated need** for this. So, what is the real reasoning? And if it’s because you want to seem more inclusive and multicultural, *I think there are more pressing changes, like curriculum.*”

When we asked young Latines about institutional actions that make them feel genuinely supported, four characteristics emerged:

- 🌀 Responds to **demonstrated needs**
- 🌀 Leads to **meaningful** change
- 🌀 Assumes **diverse** experiences
- 🌀 Aligns with personal **values**

🌀 KEY INSIGHT—THREE

Young Latines associate belonging with people rather than institutions. Being known and accepted by the people who make up those institutions is key.

When we asked young Latines how institutions inform their sense of belonging, many stated that belonging is not about an institution at all, but rather is about the relationships they have. In this, Latines are the same as other demographic groups. But unlike other young people, Latines’ sense of belonging correlates positively with participation in religious gatherings. When we distinguished between young Latines who go to church weekly, monthly, and never, we saw that social isolation decreases as participation in religious gatherings increases. For example, 58% of young Latines feel as if no one understands them. This drops 9 percentage points, to 49%, among those who go to Mass once a month, and 14 percentage points, to 44%, among young Latines who go to Mass once a week.

However, while 77% of young Latines state they are at least slightly religious, only 30% attend religious gatherings regularly. And while many Latines—both affiliated and unaffiliated—engage in

personal religious or spiritual activities, like art, meditation, and prayer, over half (54%) say they feel they don't need a religious or spiritual community.



77% of young Catholic Latines state they are **at least slightly religious**. **Only 30%** attend religious gatherings regularly.

So, what would it take for young Latines to feel welcome in a religious or spiritual space? When we asked this question, we heard that acceptance is key. For example, Mari, 19, told us she stopped going to church as soon as she came out as gay to her mom. Her mom told her she would no longer force her into a space in which Mari is not accepted.

Fernanda, 18, told us that simply being invited and going to church regularly wouldn't make her feel more connected. Instead, she told us that she would feel welcome in a religious or spiritual community that "allowed everyone the space and respect to believe as much as they want to and to transition into that space at their own pace."



This joint study, undertaken collaboratively with Dominican University's campus ministry program and Springtide Research Institute, is supported with funding from a private foundation. The insights named here are a small part of the full findings and frameworks, which will be published in 2022.

For more information about this forthcoming report and the corresponding season of The Voices of Young People Podcast, visit springtideresearch.org/cultural-bounds-belonging.

NOTE

As meaning and understanding evolve over time, the language we use evolves too. In the past 20 years, many terms have been used to describe a person of Latin American descent, including *Latino*, *Latin@*, *Latinx*, and, more recently, *Latine*. Like all new words, these terms are contested. At Springtide we are committed to using the terms that reflect young people's values or that they themselves prefer. In this report, we use *Latine*, a gender-neutral term for a person of Latin American descent, because it is inclusive of all young people regardless of gender identity and works well with the Spanish, Portuguese, and English languages. There are other ways of naming this demographic, even in the context of this report, as our work as researchers also relies on certain standardized terms when it comes to collecting demographic information through surveys.

Of the young Catholics who identified as “very religious,” **only 31%** told us **they found connecting with their faith community helpful.**

Only 20% of young Catholics who identified as “**moderately religious**” found this helpful.

Only 10% of young people ages 13 to 25 told us that **a faith leader reached out to them personally during the pandemic.**

For young Catholics, that number was even lower: **only 6%** of young Catholics say **a faith leader reached out to them during the pandemic.**

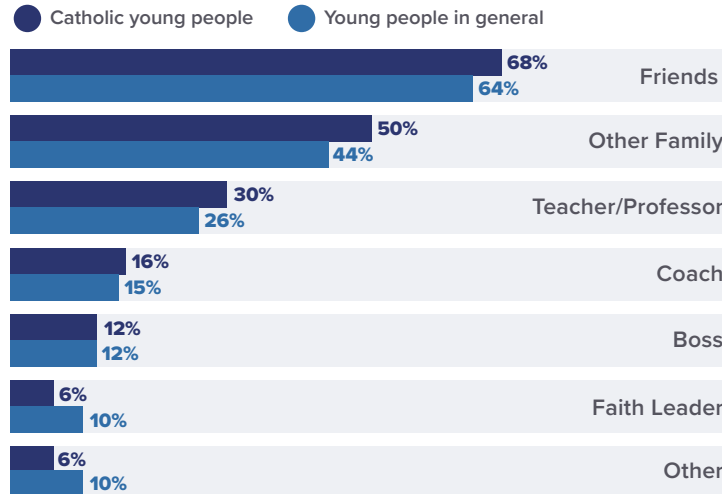


Of the young people who identified as “very religious,” **less than half (40%)** told us they found connecting with their faith community helpful during challenging or uncertain times.

By and large, young people, even young Catholics who describe themselves as “very religious,” aren’t turning to religious institutions, practices, services, or leaders in times of uncertainty. And whether or not religious leaders are *trying* to reach young people, our data show that they aren’t reaching them. When we asked young people about their experience one year into the pandemic, only 10% of young people ages 13 to 25 told us that a faith leader reached out to them personally during the year.


If anyone outside of your home has reached out to you personally, who was it?

Respondents could select more than one option.



Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

Our data show a clear disconnect between young people and religious institutions. But even with this disconnect, our data don't reveal a loss of interest in spiritual and religious questions among young people, or even a loss of faith.



Religious traditions have long-established ways of dealing with uncertainty and upheaval. Perhaps more than any other modern institution, religion is unafraid of life's biggest questions; indeed, many religious traditions, rituals, beliefs, and practices face these questions head-on. Faith is, in a sense, a way of responding to the experience of not knowing what comes next, in both big and small matters. And yet, young people (even those who identify as religious or spiritual) are *not* turning to those traditions and rituals during personal times of uncertainty.

In *The State of Religion & Young People 2020, Catholic Edition: Relational Authority*, we reported that programs alone—even highly engaging and well-attended programs—are not enough to give young people a sense of trust or belonging within an organization. Young people need trusted mentors who practice listening, integrity, transparency, care, and expertise. Our *New Normal* guide makes it clear that young people dealing with adolescence and young adulthood amid an unprecedented pandemic didn't turn to religion to help navigate pressing questions or concerns. **Sixteen percent of young people in general reported turning to “no one” when feeling overwhelmed or unsure about something. Young people in general reported turning to “someone from [their] faith community” at the same low rate (16%).**

Nearly 1 in 5 young people in general (18%) told Springtide they lost the practice of attending religious or spiritual services during the pandemic, and about the same percentage of respondents (20%) said they were happy that this connection was lost. Though half of young Catholics say they watched at least one religious or spiritual service online (50%), very few young Catholics say they found joy (2%) or hope (6%) in these services. Just 4% say they hope virtual services continue after the pandemic.

5

Watch Dr. Josh Packard and Derrick Scott III talk about how non-white and queer young people are navigating church.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources

WATCH

18% of young Catholics say **they turned to someone in [their] faith community**, while **14%** say they “**turned to no one.**”

24% of young Catholics told Springtide they **lost the practice of attending religious or spiritual services during the pandemic.**

20% of young Catholics said they **were happy this connection was lost.**

A CLOSER LOOK COVID-19

The uncertainty and instability brought on by the pandemic hit many young people hard. It was not just a road bump on an otherwise mapped-out route, but an abrupt detour that upended their expectations and plans.

Many young people have missed out on developmental markers and moments that are both formative and singular; once missed, they're gone.



Almost 3 out of 5 (57% of young people in general; 58% of Catholics) told us, **“When the pandemic is over, I expect a lot will be different, in mostly disappointing ways.”**

In April 2020, as the spread of COVID-19 was causing increasing disruption in the United States, Springtide conducted research that demonstrated, even early on, the difficulties young people faced due to social distancing and sheltering in place.

Nearly a year later, in February 2021, and nearly a year into living with varying degrees of restriction, Springtide spoke with and surveyed young people again, this time about living in and emerging from the pandemic.

6

Read about these findings in our Social Distance Study.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources



READ

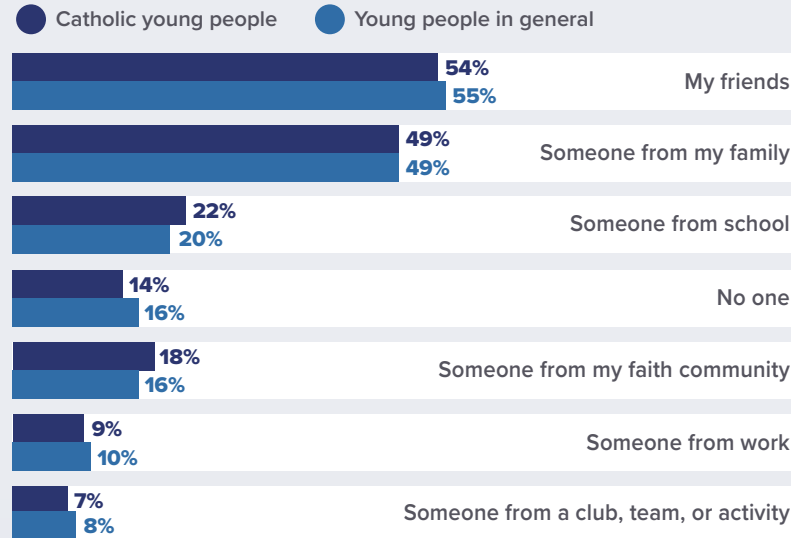
COVID-19

The cost of the COVID-19 pandemic on relationships—with both people and institutions—was hard on young people.

A large proportion of young people in general (42%) say no one outside their home reached out to them to see if they were alright, leaving nearly half feeling isolated (47%) and without anyone to talk to about how they were feeling or what they were going through (47%). Though many young people spent lots of time at home around family members and roommates, 59% said that even while living with others, they still felt alone.

When you have felt overwhelmed and didn't know what to do about something, who did you turn to for help?

Respondents could select more than one option.



Percentages approximate due to rounding.

Nearly 70% (66% of young people in general and 68% of young Catholics in particular) tell us that after the pandemic they “won’t take for granted relationships and opportunities the way [they] did before.”

> **38%** of young Catholics say **no one outside their home reached out to them to see if they were alright.**

50% felt isolated and almost as many (**49%**) were **without someone to talk to.**

62% of young Catholics said that **even while living with others, they still felt alone.**



59%

of young Catholics **didn't feel the government did its best to protect people during the pandemic.**

Young Catholics had low confidence about **feeling safe in church (23%)** and at **spiritual gatherings (11%).**

64%

of young Catholics say **it will take time to rebuild trust where it was lost.**



Download the free report: springtideresearch.org/research/the-new-normal



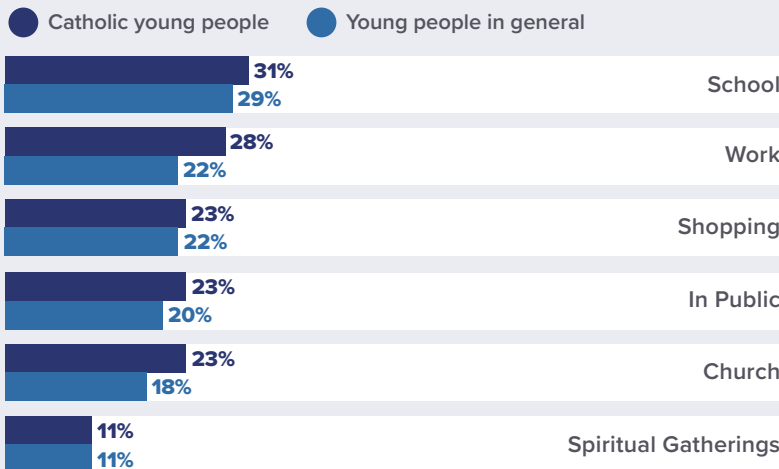
A majority of young people in general (65%) didn't feel the government did its best to protect people during the pandemic. Young people had low confidence about feeling safe in church (18%) and spiritual gatherings (11%) during the pandemic. Over half (57%) of young people say it will take time to rebuild trust where it was lost.



Over half (57%) of young people in general say **it will take time to rebuild trust where it was lost.**

Spaces where young people say they feel safe during the pandemic:

Respondents could select more than one option.



Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

Trusted guides can help young people make sense of their pandemic experiences and adjust to life after the pandemic. In *The New Normal: 8 Ways to Care for Gen Z in a Post-Pandemic World*, we offer eight research-informed ways that caring adults can help young people emerge from this season of upheaval and uncertainty.

The pandemic prompted Springtide's initial look at the way young people navigate uncertainty, and we've continued to explore this theme. We recognize that uncertainty is at the heart of adolescence and young adulthood, and also that responding to uncertainty is at the heart of many religions.

What does Springtide mean by *religious*?

For Springtide, the term *religious* is not a reference to a particular creed, code, or system, but rather a term that captures and categorizes a wide array of diverse impulses, questions, and connections. These are the impulses that inspire young people to pursue community, identity, meaning, and various practices. And we recognize that these impulses are increasingly finding expression in ways that may not seem overtly religious because they are not connected directly to a specific tradition or institution. Instead, the desire for meaning may show up in careers, club sports, or creative hobbies. Young people find outlets for justice, faith, or purpose in politics, volunteering, nature, and close relationships.

While we see the value in any activity that promotes the flourishing of young people, we also recognize the unique value traditional religion often can and does offer. From a sociological standpoint (as opposed to a theological one), we see the way religions, across creed and culture, can offer frames for living well, with careful consideration for congruence between the inner and outer life. We acknowledge the historical significance of religion for navigating times of uncertainty as well as questions of meaning, identity, and community, and it is from this starting point that we begin thinking about the ways young people are (or are not) engaging religion today.

At Springtide, we recognize the natural ways traditional religious institutions might be able to show up for young people in these seasons of upheaval. But we also know only 29% of young people in general who tell us they are actively part of a spiritual community also reached out to that community during a difficulty.

Why aren't young people, even Catholic young people, turning to traditional religious rituals, practices, and communities when they navigate difficult or uncertain times?



Only 21%

of Catholic young people who tell us **they are actively part of a spiritual community also reached out to that community during a difficulty.**

A CLOSER LOOK

The Disconnect

We wanted to find out why young people, even religious and spiritual young people, aren't turning to religion or traditional religious practices, beliefs, or communities when navigating difficulties. So we asked them: Why not?

Why, when facing uncertain and difficult times, do you not participate in religious practices or turn to religious communities?

Percentage of young people who agreed with each statement:

● Catholic young people ● Young people in general

"I don't believe some of the things I hear talked about at religious gatherings."



"I do not like to be told answers about faith and religion. I'd rather discover my own answers."



"I don't feel like I can be my full self in a religious organization."



"I'm not sure how to get connected to a new faith community."



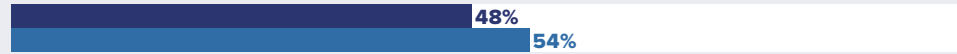
"Religion, faith, or religious leaders will try to give me answers, but I am looking for something else."



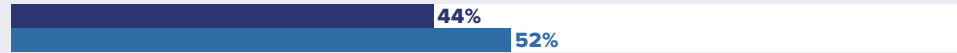
"Because other things help me find meaning in my life, I don't need a faith community."



“Religious communities try to fix my problem instead of just being there for me.”



“Religious communities are rigid and restrictive, and that’s not helpful to me.”



“Because I have other communities, I don’t need a faith community.”



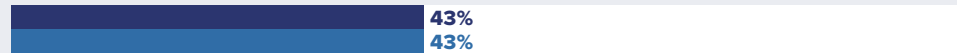
“Religion is about certainty and doesn’t welcome uncertainty, doubt, or asking questions.”



“Religious gatherings focus on topics that make me uncomfortable.”



“I don’t feel close enough to anyone that has a religion or faith to ask about it or share my thoughts.”



“I don’t trust religion, faith, or religious leaders in those kinds of organizations.”



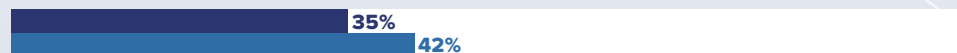
“I don’t feel safe within religious or faith institutions.”



“I don’t think religion, faith, or religious leaders will care about the things I want to talk about or bring up during times of uncertainty.”



“I did not do anything with religion as a child.”



Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

50%

of young Catholics say they **don't know how to get connected to a faith community even if they'd like to.**



51% of young people in general say they **don't know how to get connected to a faith community even if they'd like to.**



Religion is something to help manage stress and uncertainty. Well, I guess it hasn't really been that for me because I don't have, or I haven't found, a church that I like. But for my brother, religion has really helped him with everything. Like, he loves hearing that people have been praying for him and stuff, and it makes him feel a lot better. So I feel like religion definitely helps some people in tough times, but I just haven't found that yet.

—Jesse, 18

Only 16% of young Catholics say they trust organized religion completely. That's only a 2% higher rate of trust than the general population of young people (14%), which includes atheists, agnostics, and young people who identify as “nothing in particular.” Our 2020 report on Relational Authority shows that a lack of integrity in relationships diminishes trust, and the same theme emerged in our 2021 interviews.

ALMOST

50%

of young people in general tell us they don't turn to faith communities due to lack of trust in the people, beliefs, and systems of organized religion.

“

I think I'm farther away from a religious faith because I don't . . . I guess I just didn't like how my mom used it as a way to not take responsibility for her actions.

—Desiree, 22

Viola is a young Christian woman who nonetheless recognizes the way religion can harm instead of help. With 39% of young people in general telling us they've been harmed by religion, and 45% telling us they don't feel safe when it comes to religion, this is a significant experience among today's young people, even today's religious young people.

“

I have been exposed to people who've completely left the church because they've been hurt by it. And I've also visited some churches that I have really, really loved and resonated with, but I've also been really hurt by some, some churches as a whole, not just people and some of the basic beliefs that exclude other people or don't necessarily teach love. So I've had a really hard time with the Christian church, but I also really see the importance of having a congregation of people that all believe we originated from the same place and have the same love and spirituality.

—Viola, 17

> **42%** of young Catholics tell us they **don't turn to faith communities due to a lack of trust in the people, beliefs, and systems of organized religion.**



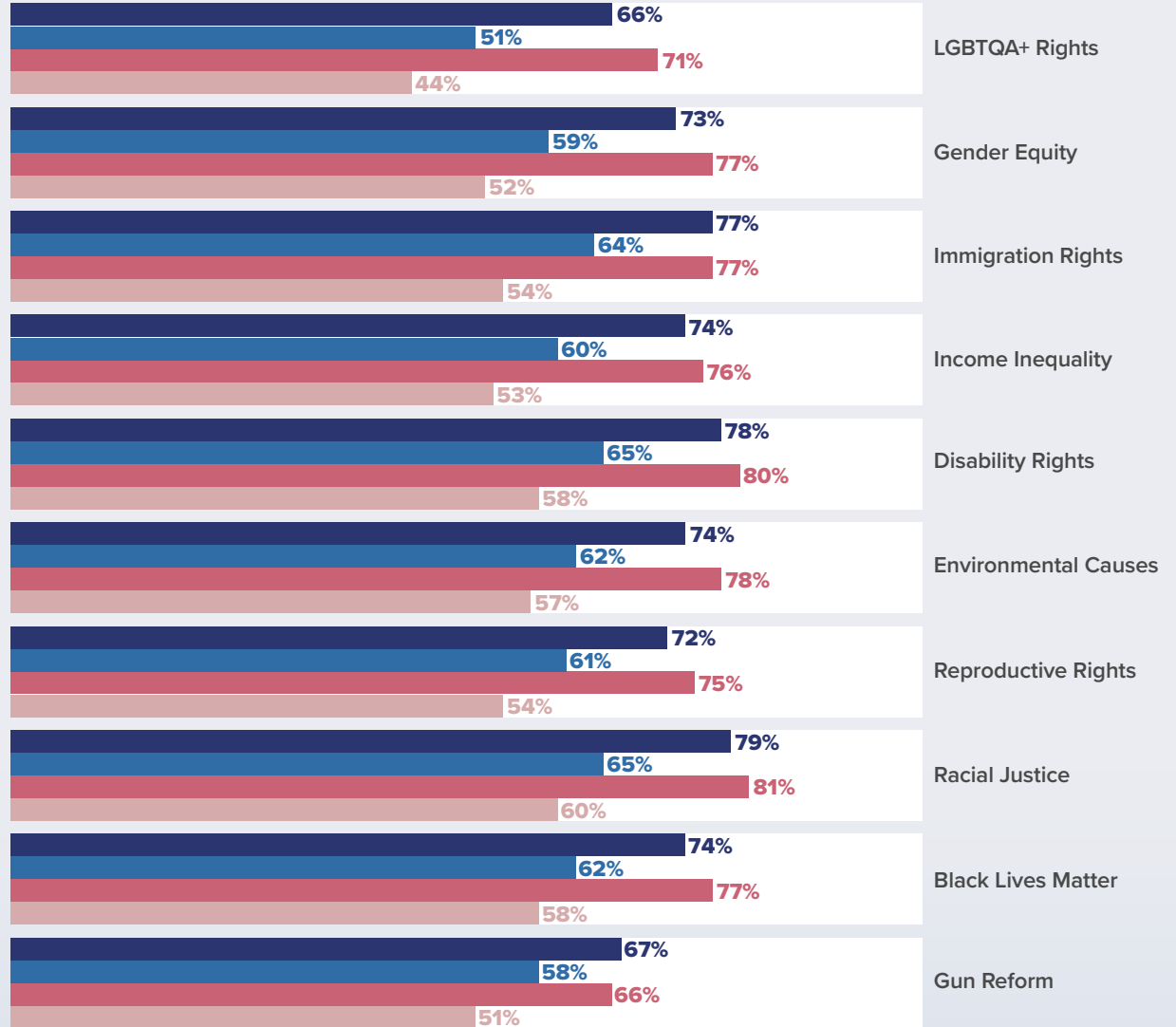
38% of young Catholics say **they've been harmed by religion**, and **42%** say **they don't feel safe when it comes to religion.**

The Values Gap

Many young people don't think religious or faith communities care about the issues they care about.

Catholic young people: ● I care ● They care | Young people in general: ● I care ● They care

ISSUES I CARE ABOUT...



When it comes to shared values, half of all young people don't think religious institutions care about the things that matter most to young people. We wanted to dig deeper into this observation, so we asked young people: How much do you care about this issue? And then we asked them how much they think religious communities with which they are familiar care about the same issue.


Nearly half (44%)

of young Catholics don't think religious institutions care about the things that matter most to young people.

Overall, atheists report the greatest percentage differential between their personal deep caring and their perception of how deeply faith communities care. That is, they care the most about these social concerns and are most likely to believe that religious institutions do not care much at all. Young Catholics, on average, believe they care more about these issues than their church or faith community does, but the disparity between the two is smaller than the national population. That is, young Catholics seem to care more about these issues, but many still sense that their church cares too.

Almost 4 out of 5 young people in general expressed care for environmental causes (about the same as young Catholics in particular), and more than half of all young people (and 44% of Catholics) tell us that going into nature is a religious experience for them. But there is a disparity between how much they care about the environment and how much they perceive religious organizations care, especially when looking at the whole population of young people.

For religious young people in particular—not just Catholics, but any young person who identifies as religious—this sense of disconnect in shared values can be the issue that determines whether they will stay with a religious organization or not. Ethan is a young gay man raised in the Catholic Church and still wrestling with how and whether he can remain connected to it. More than any other issue, young people in general perceive a dramatic disconnect in values over the rights of LGBTQA+ people. Similarly, LGBTQA+ rights and issues of income inequality admit the highest disparity between what young Catholics value and what they believe their church values.



I'm gay. And I know that the conservative Christian community doesn't necessarily support people who are LGBTQ+. And a lot of the beliefs were written by members of the religion who don't necessarily respect these people. And so it's made me question to what extent can I really trust that this is what I should believe, that it is ethical or proper. And for that reason, I've kind of lost faith because I just feel like there's not a lot of trust I can place in the religion when there's a lot of hypocrisy and contradiction.

—Ethan, 21

Without a shared sense about what issues matter in the world, what precedent is there for believing that religious institutions will be a worthwhile guide in other areas of life?



KEY FINDINGS

What Young People Are Telling Us

In 2021, we asked young people in general about particular crossroads that can evoke uncertainty: making decisions about the future; sudden events like death or disease; relationship transitions like breakups, divorce, or new partnerships; major events like graduating, moving, or starting a career. We asked the degree to which young people felt stressed, anxious, worried, confused, or scared when navigating uncertain circumstances, but we also asked whether they felt calm, confident, excited, or positive about whatever was coming next. We learned that young people are experiencing uncertainty right now.



40% say they have experienced trauma.

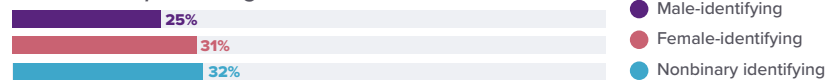


62% say they have experienced emotional distress as a result of a challenging event.




28% reported experiencing a challenging event that was causing uncertainty or making them feel unsettled, uncomfortable, or stressed at the time of completing the survey.

“Yes, I am experiencing this now.”



Through survey data gathered over the course of a year, nearly 1 in 3 young people told us they are *currently* experiencing a challenging event. That means nearly 1 in every 3 young people in your life or care probably feels the same.


Despite this constant backdrop of uncertainty in young people's lived experience, a portrait of their resilience emerges.



I feel like I'm a little more optimistic and positive than I would have been before because of experiences that I've gone through already. I feel like there's nothing that can affect me as bad or, like, be as detrimental than what I've already experienced.

—Lilly, 22

We know that the majority of young people consider themselves religious or spiritual. “Religious” can mean a range of things. It does not necessarily mean the whole package of religious beliefs, practices, or commitments to community.



I'm not deeply religious, but I guess for me, religion is just something that kind of helps me when I'm feeling like I'm . . . like I need to believe in something. It can be calming, like when I pray.

—Rene, 18

So we are not only interested in their experience of and responses to uncertainty but also in the role religion—the unique ways they are approaching beliefs, practices, identity, and community—plays as young people navigate uncertain times.





KEY FINDINGS

What You'll Find

On the following pages, we present a lot of data. We want you to emerge from our Key Findings with a sense of the big picture—large trends at work in the religious lives of all young people as they navigate uncertainty. The final spread of data features “A Catholic Look,” insights and findings that focus on the Catholic experience of uncertainty and the ways young Catholics, compared to the general population of young people represented through Key Findings, are navigating life’s biggest questions.

KEY FINDINGS—ONE

Young People & Uncertainty

Young people are experiencing uncertainty right now about a range of events and realities they’re facing. They are coping by turning to trusted relationships. By and large, those relationships don’t include faith leaders.

KEY FINDINGS—TWO

Religious Identity & Uncertainty

A growing percentage of young people identify as “just Christian,” a term that suggests a sense of being religious without being part of a particular tradition. Across the board, young people who tell us they are religious also tell us they are flourishing at higher rates in every aspect of their well-being and relationships.

KEY FINDINGS—THREE

Religious Beliefs & Uncertainty

What do religious and/or spiritual young people believe, exactly? We asked about a range of things: connection to nature, God, and others; doubt and trust in a higher power. More young people feel connected to nature than to God. Twice as many young people believe in a higher power’s existence than doubt it.

KEY FINDINGS—FOUR

Religious Practices & Uncertainty

Just as being religious doesn't necessarily mean believing certain things or identifying with a specific tradition, it also doesn't mean maintaining a prescribed set of practices. Young people turn to a variety of practices they deem religious.

KEY FINDINGS—FIVE

Relationships & Uncertainty

A fifth of young people say they aren't flourishing in their closest relationships, and many young people who identify as religious tell us they are not members of a religious community. But these types of relationships are the first place they think to turn in times of need—meaning 20% of young people don't necessarily have that help when facing life's biggest questions.

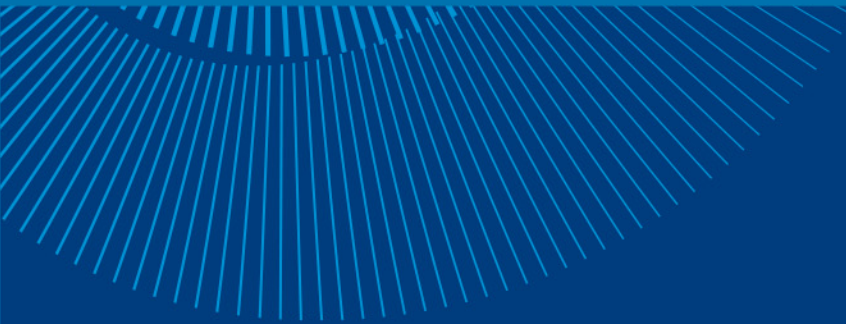
KEY FINDINGS—SIX

A Catholic Look

Our data on young Catholics confirm trends at work in the larger population of young people. Catholics are experiencing uncertainty at similar rates, those who are religious are flourishing at higher rates, and their understanding of a higher power differs by only a few percentage points from their non-Catholic peers. Like the general population, young Catholics of color are more likely to be committed members of a religious or spiritual community.

In Part II, we explore a concept called Faith Unbundled. Our data throughout Key Findings reveal that young people's religious identities are not necessarily tied to formal institutions' beliefs, practices, and communities. In other words, young people combine the elements of beliefs, practices, identity, and community from numerous sources, rather than from one, bundled-up tradition.





Each year Springtide® Research Institute gathers data from more than 10,000 young people ages 13 to 25 from across the United States and releases findings in its annual report, *The State of Religion & Young People*. This special edition of the 2021 report focuses on what the data tell us about young Catholics.

Catholic young people's religious practices, beliefs, and perceptions are similar to the general population in many respects. A key finding in 2021 is that young people—Catholics and their non-Catholic peers—who report that they are “religious” also report that they are flourishing in all other aspects of their lives. This is, of course, encouraging.



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However, young Catholics, like all young people in the face of uncertainty, are not turning to their faith practices, rituals, beliefs, and communities in the ways we might expect of people who report that they are “religious.” Our data reveal how young Catholics today are serious about engaging and exploring their faith, but in ways that look quite different from prior generations.

This report includes a foreword by Katherine Angulo V. of the McGrath Institute for Church Life and includes insights from Catholic teachers, ministers, and students.

Made possible by the generous funding of two Catholic family foundations, this report is designed to help Catholic leaders understand the religious, spiritual, and human needs and perspectives of today's youth in order to more effectively accompany them in their faith seeking.

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