

YOUNG ADULT CATHOLICS

*Religion in
the Culture of Choice*



DEAN R. HOGE
WILLIAM D. DINGES
MARY JOHNSON, S.N.D. DE N.
JUAN L. GONZALES, JR.

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME PRESS

Notre Dame, Indiana

"God is present in a special way in the poor," ranked second and fifth respectively as essential to Catholic faith. In addition, as Table 3.2 in chapter 3 indicates, the vast majority of our confirmands agree with statements relating the application of faith to the improvement of society. Yet only 7 percent of the non-Latinos and 9 percent of the Latinos in our sample had attended a meeting of a Catholic social justice group or organization over the last two years. Fifty-three percent strongly agree or agree with the statement that "the Church should stick to religion and not be involved in economic or political issues." And only 16 percent of our non-Latinos and 12 percent of our Latinos had ever heard about or read about the American bishops' 1985 statement on economic justice for all. (A slightly higher percentage [23 percent non-Latinos; 28 percent Latinos] had heard about or read John Paul II's more recent statement criticizing the culture of death.) We conclude that social justice is perceived by most young adult Catholics as a necessary part of their faith, even though few are involved and few have knowledge or understanding of the tradition in this regard.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Our findings can be summarized in eight points: First, young adult Catholics remain overwhelmingly spiritual even where their commitment to institutional Catholicism is loose and tenuous. Where they have fallen away and then returned to active practice as Catholics, the majority do so precisely because of perceived spiritual needs ("felt empty," "lack spiritual life"). And the persons now non-Catholic have not fallen away from the Christian faith; they have *switched churches* or kept a personal spirituality while rejecting churchgoing. This finding differs significantly from studies pointing to a more fundamental loss of faith and a relativistic worldview among persons disaffiliating from mainline Protestantism (Hoge et al. 1994).

Second, although less true for Latinos than for non-Latinos, traditional forms of devotional piety continue to decline. These forms are weak ritual and symbolic venues for shaping Catholic spirituality or for defining Catholic identity. And, although appealing to some segments

of the young adult Catholic population, we did not find—as the Davidson study (1997) did not find—a significant rebound effect signaling a widespread movement back to these traditional forms among our interviewees. And, as noted earlier, where this interest does exist, it cannot be assumed to be an expression of conservative Catholicism; it may as well be an expression of the need for demonstrative boundaries, personal conversion, and public witness.

Third, the Virgin Mary endures as a cultural icon of Catholic identity. Yet her utility in the actual construction and expression of young adult Catholic spirituality is limited. This is less true for Latino Catholics for whom the cult of the Virgin Mary, such as Our Lady of Guadalupe, serves as a symbol both of religious and cultural identity and of liberation from unjust social structures (Vidal 1997:637).

Overall the disassociation of many young adult Catholics from traditional forms of Catholic devotionalism and from the saints is having important effects. The norms and patterns of this older spirituality promoted a distinct Catholic ethos and mythos. They fostered a distinct Catholic identity and set Catholics apart from non-Catholics in unequivocal ways. They also facilitated lay linkage to the institutional Church and built community.

Fourth, and related to the above, young adult Catholic connections to parish life are weaker today. Beyond Mass attendance, many young adults have limited connections to parishes that might contribute in distinct ways to their spiritual formation as Catholics. This is slightly less true for older Catholics in our sample who are at a life cycle phase (married and with children) traditionally associated with higher church attendance and parish involvement. It is also significant that so few young adults indicated that their closest friends were members of their parish. Sociological research has shown that friends are important in maintaining the plausibility of a worldview, anchoring spirituality in a particular place, and in the importance attached to following church teachings (Wuthnow 1988:211).

Fifth, the Mass remains a primary source of institutional-based spiritual nurturance for young Catholics, even while attendance rates have declined in recent decades. Our Princeton Research Associates data suggest that Mass attendance has an important and indirect impact on Catholic spirituality because it is associated with a higher

level of attachment to *all components of Catholicism*, even where the direction of causality remains unclear.⁶ In relation to the disconnectedness from parish life noted above, a heavier burden has been placed on the community-building capacity of the liturgy—which may explain, in part, why young adult Catholics often describe a “good liturgy” by its ability to draw the community together. The Mass also expresses and reinforces a Catholic sacramental imagination, a distinct sensitivity to the reality of the divine in the concrete and visible (Greeley 1990). Whether this sacramental imagination can be sustained with more sporadic Mass attendance by young adult Catholics remains unclear.

Sixth, research on religion today points to the uncoupling of religion from spirituality, to organized religion’s waning monopoly over the sacred, and to spiritual seeking outside the parameters of institutional religion (Roof 1993, Wuthnow 1998). While young adult Catholics are exposed to a multitude of spiritual wares, our research suggests that widespread assumption that young adults today are a “generation of seekers” needs revision. The level of spiritual seeking by young adult Catholics as measured by actual participation in other traditions or by spiritual experimentation is low. As noted earlier, attendance was near zero at meetings of prayer groups associated with Marian apparitions, at non-Christian spiritual groups, and at twelve-step or recovery groups. We found no evidence that Catholics or non-Catholics in our sample are turning to any non-Christian religions, Eastern spiritual movements, or New Age groups in any significant numbers. Insofar as they take part in any religious or spiritual groups at all, these groups are Christian and typically Catholic. And, although non-Catholics were somewhat higher in involvement in some of these groups, the patterns were weak, mixed, and not easily summarized.

Seventh, an emerging evangelical-like spirituality can be found among young adult Catholics. The most obvious aspect of this trend is the emphasis on a “personal relationship with the Lord,” rather than on traditional Catholic sacramentalism, communalism, or on the mediational role of the Church. While individual Catholics so disposed are likely to have previous experiences with Protestantism or a Protestant

spouse, we believe this evangelical orientation is growing. It derives from the influence of the Cursillo and Charismatic Movements, the new ecumenism, participation in Protestant-organized Bible study groups, and the waning of evangelicalism’s historical anti-Catholicism. It is also linked to the broader cultural tendency to diminish the significance of denominational identity. Among our interviewees, however, this evangelical orientation appears not to be associated with a strong and exclusive biblical orientation, with a “Jesus only” mentality, with being “born again,” per se, or with strong commitment to proselytizing as with many Protestant evangelicals (Smith 1998). Rather it expresses a more individualistic religious identity that minimizes institutional affiliation or community commitment.⁷

Eighth, our data show that many young adult Catholics link spirituality with social justice initiatives and service to the poor. In this respect, their spirituality is not a me-centered one. It is a spirituality with important implications for the transformation of society. Yet it often lacks connection with specific Church teachings or with contemporary Catholic theology. The tendency to emphasize charitable rather than structural approaches to social problems is one indication of this missing connection. Nor is it clear that social justice concerns among young adult Catholics derive from the experience of the Mass, as liturgical reformers had hoped.

The dominance of personal freedom, autonomy, and self-sufficiency in contemporary American society and the privatizing of religion is widely discussed today. On the debit side, these developments have been associated with removing faith and spirituality from a community and institutional basis, weakening denominational loyalties, and evaporating a common moral vocabulary (Bellah et al. 1985, Roof and McKinney 1987, Roof 1993, Hoge et al. 1994). Is this privatizing trend influencing Catholic spirituality? Do young adult Catholics have a mediated and communal spiritual sensibility symbolized by the Communion of Saints, the Mystical Body of Christ, and some level of commitment to the Church’s teaching authority? Or are they spiritual “Lone Rangers” in keeping with the cultural ethos of autonomy and individualism? In our research we found evidence of both. Here we identify two spiritual types of young adult Catholics.⁸

TWO SPIRITUAL TYPES

Church-as-Choice Catholics

The tendencies toward “Lone Ranger” spiritual individualism are most pronounced among the young adults we identify as church-as-choice Catholics. These individuals are not concerned about a specific denominational identity. As one person put it, the Church is “just another human institution . . . that was constructed by people.” While Catholicism has more “bells and whistles than Protestantism,” it is essentially the same. These young adults see little importance in the distinctiveness of Catholic institutional identity. To them Catholicism is one choice or preference among others. Church-as-choice Catholics also see little necessary connection between religion and spirituality. The particulars of Catholic doctrine and Church life are not as important to them as the broader human quest to find spiritual fulfillment. “Religion” is about doctrine and institutions; “spirituality” is about a higher power and personal faith. These are “two separate things.” Individuals with these views are weakly connected to Catholicism’s sacramental and symbolic tradition or to its institutional character. They are a large part of the 64 percent of young adults who believe that one can be a good Catholic without going to Mass. Nor do they view other elements of the Church’s sacramental life as essential. As one twenty-four-year-old Latino said about of confession:

Why would I want to speak with a priest and ask for confession to a man? Maybe the priest is a good person, but for something very personal and spiritual, God is here with me and he’s the only person who understands.

Another commented that “When I do something bad, I tell God right now I’m sorry and I don’t think I need another person there.” And regarding saints, another observed: “I believe we can go directly to the Father though Jesus’s name. I don’t think it is necessary to go through his saints.”

Other church-as-choice Catholics differentiate between Catholicism as a religious tradition into which they were born, and the priority in

their lives of spiritual sources extraneous to it. A twenty-six-year-old African American Catholic male who recently embraced a new biblical perspective brought to him by a Protestant minister commented:

I still consider myself ‘Catholic.’ I practice Catholicism but, again, the Catholic piece of me is not as important—or does not play as much a role—as the spiritual side of me . . . which was opened up by this woman.

Church-as-choice Catholics tend to conflate religion and spirituality with ethical behavior. They exemplify a subtype of Ammerman’s “Golden Rule” Christians (1994). Like their Protestant counterparts, “Golden Rule” Catholics view spirituality primarily in terms of being a “good person” or having compassion for those in need—rather than a function of anything derivative of or distinctive to Catholicism as a living faith tradition. Noted one respondent: “I just feel as long as you live a life without harming others or yourself and . . . you are just really living a good, decent life, then you really are living the way God intended you to live.” A twenty-year-old inactive male said that he believed you could be a “good Catholic” just by “praying and just being, or trying to be, a good person.” Another twenty-eight-year-old male responded to the question as to whether or not a person could be a good Catholic without going to Mass by emphasizing the priority of “lived spirituality”:

Jesus never said that you had to come to the temple to pray. [He said] that whenever two or more of you are gathered in my name, I am there. . . . I think that even if you didn’t attend a Mass. . . . but yet you went to a soup kitchen and you lived spiritually, you did what Christ taught you do, [which] is to help your fellow man. Aren’t you living that scripture?

Church-as-choice Catholics are also more likely to follow a spiritual path in which they seek sources of inspiration that, as one woman put it, “help reinforce the choices I’ve made in my life, the values I have” rather than conforming to the doctrinal and disciplinary traditions of the Church.

Core Catholics

Core Catholics (an estimated 10 percent of our sample) are much less individualistic in their spirituality and in their relation to the institutional Church. They are spiritual church attenders. They take seriously the teachings of the pope (even where they may disagree with particulars), view Catholicism as the one true Church (while acknowledging the truths of other traditions), pray daily, and reject the idea that one can be a “good Catholic” without going to Mass. Core Catholics do not separate spirituality from religion or see the two as antithetical. And they do not believe that the spiritual life can be lived as a “solo project.” As one thirty-five-year-old male noted, religion and spirituality “flow back and forth from each other, we’re put here to praise God and serve others and you can’t do that on an individual basis.” Accordingly, an individual needs to be connected to a religious institution in order to have his or her spiritual life strengthened and directed by the tradition’s collective wisdom. For core Catholics, spirituality is also perceived as having an objective basis in the Church’s sacramentalism. When a person is disconnected too long from that tradition, his or her spirituality will be adversely impacted. As one thirty-year-old male told us, “If you stop sacramental life, you are a dead Catholic.” While this emphasis on sacramentalism does not preclude the use of other spiritual resources, for core Catholics those derived from the tradition are the more foundational and formative. This is true regarding the Virgin Mary and, to a lesser degree, the saints.

CONCLUSION

A core of young adult Catholics practice a spirituality rooted in the symbols and disciplines of their tradition, while the majority are less connected to the tradition. The issue is simple enough. Young adult Catholics, like most other individuals, seek spiritual meaning in their life experiences. They draw symbols and inspiration from a variety of material and personal sources (nature, music, childbirth, marriage) suggestive of the Catholic sacramental imagination. They also draw inspiration from the American spiritual marketplace even when, as our data

show, their actual spiritual experimenting remains primarily within the broad parameters of the Christian tradition. Their spirituality is also pragmatic and praxis-oriented. However, feelings, emotions, and personal experience count more than theology and doctrines in all of these respects. In a radically relativistic and individualistic culture, the authority of personal experience has become one of the few certain norms for authenticity—spiritual and otherwise.

Young adult Catholics construct their spiritual life by testing personal experience with a variety of sources. These sources must be accessible, plausible, and culturally relevant to them. Institutional Catholicism with its panoply of spiritual models, practices, and critical theological traditions, has lost considerable normative authority in this regard. This loss stems from the lack of knowledge of the spiritual tradition on the part of many young adults, from Catholicism’s internal turmoil since Vatican II, and from the free-market nature of the American spiritual economy. It also derives from the loss of plausibility of elements of Catholicism’s traditional spirituality in a changed historical and cultural context. In our postmodern world of pluralism, ecumenism, relativism, suspicion of institutions, and the cultural uncoupling of spirituality and religion, the spiritual narratives of many young adult Catholics often resemble generic “faith journeys” with limited connection to their tradition. Many young adults drift toward a religionless spirituality.⁹ While it is true that the Church’s traditional forms of spirituality remain viable among certain Catholic subgroups—even where they lack awareness of the real valences or historical diversity of these forms—we find meager evidence of a sustained interest among young adult Catholics today in such traditions or practices beyond their relevance to a generic quest for personal spirituality. Nor are the emergent, post-Vatican II norms of a credible and distinct Catholic spiritual life familiar or obvious to many of them.

TABLE A.1
Comparison of Three Surveys

	<i>Our 1997 Confirmands*</i>	<i>1997 Confirmed</i>	<i>1995 Raised Catholic</i>
In the last year, how often have you attended Mass on the average? Would you say once a week or more, about once a month, less often, or what? (in percents)			
Once a week or more	31	33	30
Two or three times a month	25	8	—
Once a month	12	26	—
Less than once a month, or never	32	32	—
In the last year or so, how often have you taken part in a Scripture study or a Scripture discussion class? Weekly.	6		4
How often have you attended a prayer group or faith sharing group? Weekly.	5		4
<i>Strongly agree or agree:</i>			
One can be a good Catholic without going to Mass.	64		74
The Church should stick to religion and not be involved in economic or political issues.	54		59
There is something very special about being Catholic which you can't find in other religions.	69		56
The Catholic Church is the one true church.	52		43
I could be just as happy in some other church; it wouldn't have to be Catholic.	22		51
Lay people are just as important a part of the Church as priests are.	89		86
I cannot imagine myself being anything other than Catholic.	76		56
Catholics have a duty to try to close the gap between the rich and the poor.	77		60

Appendix B

Detailed Results of the Phone Survey

TABLE B.1
Ethnicity of Samples (*in percents*)

	<i>Non-Latinos</i>	<i>Latinos</i>
Ireland	12	
Germany	20	
Poland	5	
Italy	6	
France, French Canada	2	
England, Scotland, Wales	3	
Czechoslovakia, Greece	4	
Spain		6
Mexico		58
Puerto Rico		13
Cuba		4
Dominican Republic		4
Other Central or South America	1	2
Philippines	1	
Other Asia	1	
African American	4	
Mixed European	36	
Latino mixture	11	
Other mixture	4	1
Don't know	3	2

TABLE B.2

Level of Formal Education Completed (*in percents*)

	<i>Non-Latinos</i>	<i>Latinos</i>
Less than a high school diploma	1	6
High school diploma	18	28
Attending vocational school or technical school, or finished vocational school	6	5
Some college but no B.A. or B.S. degree	21	37
In college now	4	5
B.A. or B.S. degree	41	17
In graduate or professional school now	2	1
Graduate or professional degree	8	2

TABLE B.3

Occupations (*in percents*)

	<i>Non-Latinos</i>	<i>Latinos</i>
Homemaker, housewife	9	7
Professor, college administrator	1	0
Teacher, counselor, school administrator	6	6
Physician, dentist	1	1
Helping profession: social worker, nurse	8	5
Engineer, computer expert, systems analyst	10	3
Manager, business owner, supervisor	13	10
Accountant, CPA, lawyer	5	3
Writer, musician, artist	1	1
Secretary, bank teller, clerical worker	9	16
Sales, real estate agent	7	8
Manual or skilled worker	19	28
Farmer	1	0
Full-time student (in 20-29 groups: 16% and 13%)	8	7
Unemployed	2	2
Other	2	6

TABLE B.4

Formally Joining Other Denominations (*in percents*)

	<i>Non-Latinos</i>	<i>Latinos</i>
Did you ever leave the Catholic Church and formally join another church or religious body? Yes	6	8
(For those saying yes:)		
What group did you join?		
Episcopalian	4	0
Lutheran	8	0
Methodist	8	6
Presbyterian	4	0
Baptist	12	16
Other Protestant (incl. Pentecostal, Mormon)	28	34
Non-denominational church	32	31
"Protestant" or "Christian," unspecified	0	13
Buddhist; eastern religion	4	0
How old were you at the time?		
21 or younger	29	22
22-27	38	51
28 or older	33	28
Mean age:	25.3	24.4
What was the main reason?		
Moved and switched to nearby church I liked	4	0
Influence of spouse, dating partner, or relative	36	22
New church had better preaching	0	3
New church had better programs for children	0	3
New church had better priest or minister	0	3
More emphasis on the Bible; better Bible teaching	16	34
New church had better worship or liturgy	12	6
Old church had too strict demands (divorce, marriage, annulment)	8	3
Conversion; I was born again	8	9
Other	16	16

TABLE B.5
Persons Who Became Inactive (*in percents*)

	<i>Non-Latinos</i>			<i>Latinos</i>		
	<i>All</i>	<i>20-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>20-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>
Percent who became inactive in church life, that is, for a time did not attend as often as 12 times a year.	59	52	65	62	61	64
(Of those ever inactive:)						
Age the inactivity began:						
15 or younger	9	10	8	16	17	15
16-19	47	55	43	34	46	23
20-23	26	28	25	29	28	30
24 or older	17	7	25	21	9	33
Mean age:	20.0	18.9	20.8	20.0	18.6	21.3
Reason for becoming inactive:						
Left home, moved, away from family	19	22	18	8	11	4
Conflict or disagreement with parents	3	2	4	2	2	1
Too busy, lack of interest, lazy	35	44	27	41	42	41
Bored	3	4	3	2	2	2
Disagreed w. church, felt alienated	12	15	11	7	7	6
Too busy with family or babies	1	1	1	4	5	4
Life-style in conflict with church	1	0	2	3	2	5
Doubted, questioned, lost faith	5	4	6	4	4	5
Conflict or disagreement with spouse	2	0	3	2	1	4
Didn't like the parish or priest; felt unwelcome	3	1	5	5	4	7
No more parental pressure	5	3	6	6	6	7
Influence of spouse or dating partner	2	2	2	2	2	3
Disliked liturgy or homilies	2	2	1	0	0	0
Other or don't know	7	3	11	14	14	13

TABLE B.6
Persons Who Became Active Again (*in percents*)

	<i>Non-Latinos</i>			<i>Latinos</i>		
	<i>All</i>	<i>20-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>20-29</i>	<i>30-39</i>
(Of all persons who went inactive:)						
Are you active now, that is, attending any church 12 times a year or more?						
Yes, active	48	42	54	45	38	53
(Of those active again:)						
At what age did you become active again?						
19 or younger	4	7	3	7	12	3
20-23	34	43	28	34	58	19
24-27	36	48	19	28	28	27
28-31	15	2	22	19	2	31
32 or older	11	0	17	12	0	21
Mean age	25.1	23.0	26.4	25.5	22.4	27.7
In what kind of church?						
Catholic	86	(Too few)*		86	(Too few)	
Episcopalian	4			0		
Lutheran	1			0		
Methodist	3			1		
Presbyterian	1			1		
Baptist	2			0		
Other Protestant, Mormon	2			5		
Non-denominational church	2			7		
Other or mixed	1			1		
Main reason you became active:						
Had children, thought of family, rel.ed.	24	(Too few)		21	(Too few)	
Settled down locally, psychosocially	15			7		
Spouse influenced me	5			5		
Other family or friends influenced me	5			8		
More time available now	4			7		
I found a good church, pastor, fellowship	6			3		
Returned to old church or community	5			4		
Spiritual need: felt empty or guilty	26			28		
Conversion experience: saved, born again	2			5		
Had marital problems, wanted to improve	1			1		
Other	5			7		
No particular reason; don't know	2			4		