

## CHAPTER IV

### GENERATION ONE: AFFILIATED PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS

I turn to the faith stories of affiliated Catholic parents and grandparents (Generation one) whose children disaffiliated from church belief and practice. These participants volunteered for the study from several parishes in our local area of the western region of the Archdiocese of Boston. They included St. Mary's Parish, St. Cecilia's Parish, The Catholic Community of the Sacred Heart, and St. John the Evangelist Parish. A few others hailed from three other parishes in other parts of the archdiocese. However, most of the participants came from St. Mary's Parish in Holliston, and a number of them knew each other.

Recruitment for the study occurred through the project website, word of mouth, advertising locally and in the archdiocesan newspaper. In total, forty-five people enrolled in the study of this generation set. Enrollment included completing an initial online survey of critical demographic information before the actual interview, of which I collected thirty-six or 80% of this group's completed surveys. From this 80% response, it is possible to get a general overall demographic sense of the group. 37 or 82% participated in one of eight 90-minute focus groups. I interviewed four additional people individually, and four of the original participants could not be interviewed as we lost contact with them throughout the study. Thus, in total, forty-one interviews took place (91% of the original participants). All interviews occurred through zoom.

#### Demographics

These *Generation One* parents, and grandparents are White or Caucasian, with income levels from fifty thousand yearly and above. *Table 1* below breaks down some demographic and church participation information. These participants are consistent with the overall racial population of this part of Massachusetts and represent a substantial portion of the Catholic population in this area. This group was recruited through relational channels. I invited participants in parishes I was known to, both by pastors and their congregants. Also, near our included area are significant Latinx, Brazilian, Portuguese, and Azorean Catholic populations that were not part of this study, which is a recognized limitation of this study. Therefore, I stayed with parishes I could access more quickly and easily, given the language issues.

Of these affiliated Catholics, most held higher levels of education, college, and post-graduate. This matched salary figures, which were fifty thousand a year or more. The town of Holliston and surrounding areas are expensive places to live, with some of the highest tax brackets. One reason people move to this area is because of the quality of the school system.

Along with these demographics, frequent church attendance and their sense of the importance of religion were quite common. Most parents or grandparents attended church weekly and asserted that faith is very or fundamental to them. These findings are not a surprise, but they indicate that the disaffiliation of their children did not change their participation that in any way. In fact, for some parents, their religious practice was more important than ever to witness the importance of faith for their children, aside from the fact that it continues to be essential for them to personally.

Many of these parents and grandparents were raised Catholic since their childhood. Others converted to Catholicism before or after their marriages. Despite the diversity of Catholic experience, I found few differences regarding how they feel about the importance of their faith and their hopes for their children and grandchildren to continue that faith. It reveals that this is a story of differences among these parents and shared views within this demographic frame. That frame shows them as women, white, married with biological parents, in a higher income bracket, and regular mass attendance is vital.

<b>Gender</b>	
Female	<b>69.44%</b>
Male	30.56%
<b>Race or Identity</b>	
White or Caucasian	<b>97.22%</b>
American Indian	2.78%
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Separated or divorced	13.89%
Widowed	2.78%
Married	<b>80.56%</b>
Other	2.78%
<b>Education level</b>	
High school graduate	5.56%
Some college or trade	8.33%
College degree	30.56%
Post graduate work or degree	<b>55.56%</b>
<b>Description of Family</b>	
Two biological parents	<b>77.78%</b>
Remarried/mix	8.33%
Single parent	5.56%
Other	8.33%
<b>Total income last year</b>	
Under \$15,000	2.78%
Between \$15,000 & \$30,000	2.78%
Between \$30,000 & \$50,000	8.33%
Between \$50,000 & \$75,000	19.44%
Between \$75,000 & \$100 K	16.67%
Between \$100 K and \$150 K	<b>33.33%</b>
Over \$150 K	16.67%
<b>Mass Attendance</b>	
More than once a week	<b>30.56%</b>
Once a week	<b>52.87%</b>
Once or twice a month	2.78%
A few times of the year	2.78%
Seldom	8.33%
Never	2.78%
<b>How important is your Catholic faith now</b>	
Extremely important	<b>61.11%</b>

Very important	<b>22.22%</b>
Somewhat important	8.33%
Not so important	2.78%
Not at all important	5.56%

**TABLE 1**

## Data Analysis

The research of *generation one* involved capturing meaningful experiences and perceptions that the participants shared as they make sense out of their Catholic background and its relation to the disaffiliation of their children. I used *thematic data analysis* to organize and simplify conversations in the interview process in manageable codes, categories, and themes.<sup>1</sup> With the transcriptions of all the interviews in focus groups or with individuals, the line-by-line analysis found significant quotes that were coded. All of these codes were rearranged into categories where initial themes could be detected.

Coding was accomplished by collecting phrases and quotes organized into initial categories that gathered similar content across different individuals as the data accumulated. -themes emerged. For example, the overarching theme of raising their children Catholic elicited subthemes such as children brought up with Catholic education, children, church practice, and hopes of parents in children's faith upbringing.<sup>2</sup>

This iterative process allowed for comparison among categories to distill interviews into insights that are reflected in four overarching themes: a) Acquiring a sense of being Catholic in diverse backgrounds; b) Raising children Catholic and perceiving disaffiliation; c) Points of tension where Catholicism is deeply embedded in the family, and there is an implicit rejection of that faith to one degree or another; d) Parents cope with tensions of disaffiliation in several ways. What follows through each theme are quotes from participants of generation one. The names at the end of each section are fictitious, and the letter - numbers designation is their focus group, or it is labeled an individual interview.

## Acquiring a Sense of Being Catholic in Diverse Backgrounds

What does it mean to be Catholic? The answer to that question lies in the lives of this generation's participants with very different family experiences and yet carry many everyday experiences across all families. Being Catholic is a perceived Catholicism grounded in their own family and church experiences concerning the local parish. That experience is what they attempted to pass on to their children in diverse ways. The models they emulate are those who passed on the faith to them, their parent(s), grandparents, extended family members, neighbors, as well as significant friendships from mass attendance and church activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Karen L. Peel (2020) "A Beginner's Guide to Applied Educational Research using Thematic Analysis," Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation: Vol. 25, Article 2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7275/ryr5-k983> Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/pare/vol25/iss1/2>

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Rainwater, "Millennials Leaving Religion: A Transcendental Phenomenological Research Study on Religious Disaffiliation." (Ph.D. Dissertation, Walden University, 2019), 81-82.

Growing up as a Catholic Christian, generation one participants experienced faith with two practicing parents and with only one as well, with the mother. Also, sometimes neither parent were church goers but sent their children to church regularly.

So, my parents were not real churchgoers, but they always drove us to church and dropped us off and then picked us up afterward. They didn't really have a very personal relationship with the Lord and but there were plenty of other relatives that lived close by that were very faithful and clearly had a relationship with the Lord. And I'm looking back on this now. At the time, I probably knew about my parents not going to church, dropping us off and picking us up, but I probably wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between our relatives who are faithful and were not, except for the fact that they went to church. (Claire, parent, G1-1)

*Catholic culture* refers to a network of faith relationships that began in the family but were not limited to the immediate family. They can include extended family members, neighbors, close friends, and others with a strong relationship with the local parish. Even school could have a more significant influence than at home.

So, it was really in high school where I started kind of discovering stuff about the Catholic Church. And then when I got to college, that's really where I consider that I kind of found my own way in terms of the faith. And it was really great. (Eliona, G2-7)

So, we really didn't get in your terminology, we really didn't get the faith passed on by our parents. But our extended family, I think, had an influence on that. And I'm confident that many of them prayed for us pretty regularly because of my brother and I were very close in age. And we were out of the house a lot, getting into that neighborhood and so on. (Bob, G1-1)

Catholic parents in the past provided essential resources and witnessed great devotion for many of the participants of generation one. Some participants talked of the religiosity of their mothers, but not necessarily of their fathers. The church will be the mother's responsibility, and there was little question why the father did not accompany them to mass. Sometimes both parents did not attend mass but made sure their children did.

And my grandmother lived with us until I was about twelve and she was even worse. Oh, yes, she was very strict. She was. But again, they didn't go to church every Sunday. They did. My mother worked two jobs, so she cleaned the house and did the laundry on Sundays. We went to mass whether we had to ride our bikes or walk or whatever, we had to go. (Leticia, individual interview)

My father went to parochial school in Peabody, his parents were from Ireland, my grandparents were from Ireland, very religious. And he went to a public high school, Peabody High School. He did not go to mass with us. He didn't go to Mass at all. He didn't go to church at all. But we never really noticed that. My mother went, you know, took us and she was responsible for getting us there. (Luna, G1-4)

Passing on a sense of being Catholic was also exhibited in multi-religious families where one parent may be Catholic and the other another faith. I ran across many Catholic

Jewish parents in the families interviewed. (Evelyn, G2-2) Some participants came from families where Catholicism and Protestantism were a normal part of life. (Claire, G2-1) Several participants grew in non-Catholic homes and became Catholic through their spouses or other circumstances.

So, we went to the Presbyterian Church for a little while. We were confirmed there, and we went to church for a while. It was a church which was far from home. We had to drive to get to church, and the family stopped going after a while. We had no car. I couldn't walk to church, but I could walk to a Catholic church. So, I ended up walking to the Catholic Church. And by that time, I had met (my husband) there. (Riley, G1-4)

### Raising Children Catholic and Perceiving Disaffiliation

In part, passing on the faith to a younger generation means introducing them to sacramental life in the Catholic context. The Church teaches, "The sacraments of the New Testament were instituted by Christ the Lord and entrusted to the Church. As actions of Christ and the Church, they are signs and means which express and strengthen the faith, render worship to God, and effect the sanctification of humanity and thus contribute in the greatest way to establish, strengthen, and manifest ecclesiastical communion."<sup>3</sup> Faith formation thus began for the participants with an introduction to the faith through the sacraments of initiation, from baptism, holy communion, and confirmation. It ordinarily occurs in childhood up to the late teen years in most dioceses. Indeed, this was the case for our participants who invested a great deal in the faith formation of their children. Yet looking back, they shared influences that they perceived as challenges to their efforts.

Well, we took them to church. My husband and I took them to church on Sunday, and we did succeed with them in grammar school. And then when they got to high school, they went to Catholic high school and then three of them went to Catholic colleges. OK, so, you know, you would think that they would have gotten something from that. But I don't know the Jesuits. I don't know if they were very good about, you know, passing on faith at Boston College and Fordham University. (Leticia, individual interview)

These parents invested themselves in the faith formation of their children in many ways. Some instilled a home prayer life, and others involved themselves quite concretely in-home practices and encouraged their children to involve themselves in the parish outside of catechetical classes and mass. Many of these practices were experienced by parents in their childhood.

I made it a point to always to do prayers at night, something I did as a kid. We always said prayers together at night on. Bringing them to mass with me, although as they got into the terrible twos, it was not something I wanted to do. They were disruptive and I didn't want to be disruptive. Saying prayers was a big part of what we did. They each had a cross in the room from the time they were born. (Evelyn, G1-2).

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<sup>3</sup> Code of Canon Law, c.840, Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1999).

I was involved with their CCD classes. I wanted to be always open and available to them for that. We celebrated all of the holidays. Christmas was a huge feast in our house, all the way through Advent, all the way through Epiphany, the traditions of our faith. (Evelyn, G1-2)

Faith formation was a way to instill faith in Jesus Christ and the church and understand its importance in daily life.

I wanted them to know that there was something there that was important to them, and my daughter got it because I remember when I was going through a separation from their father, we would be driving along and I'd pull over to go to church and she would say, "Mama, we're going to God's house again." I wanted them to have that sense of a higher being and a higher power. It was really important and to this day, and I think to myself, what do people do in times of great stress and difficulty and illness? (Leticia, individual interview)

Different issues in the family have a part to play for some in how faith practice development occurred.

It's hard to have a spiritual conversation with your kids just about spirituality. So, it seems like without some circumstantial context, perhaps like you're talking about somebody who died too young. But I mean, you know, I just can't think of anything that's occurred that that kind of prompted that kind of conversation. (Jacob, G1-4)

[My husband] came to mass when we were dating one time at St. Anne's and I think he just didn't feel a connection but was fully supportive of me raising the children Catholic and being near to say, hey, you can go to church. I wish that there were a deeper connection, of course, but he was always supportive of that. I think where his influence kind of changed things a little bit is when the kids get older and they started seeing that Mom is really faithful, but dad doesn't practice at all. Maybe I'll try that. Maybe it's OK to try that. (Charlotte, G1-6)

It was a horrible divorce. I was devastated. You know, it was just really hard on me, so it was hard on her (daughter). Life dealt a bad hand. And she was at that point with her faith which wasn't really that strong for a seven-year-old. When her father says she does not want to see her anymore and I am asking her to believe in God as a father. (Laura, G1-6)

Tensions where Catholicism is deeply embedded in the family, and there is an implicit rejection of that faith

The tensions felt in these families regarding the disaffiliation of their children as they look back during these interviews covered different areas. The first area is their lack of understanding why their children no longer wished to be involved in the church. Interestingly, not knowing why they are disaffiliated persists up to the present moment and continues is a source of worry.

And he said, you know, it's one of the things I'm thinking about doing. I may become a priest. And we said, that's fantastic. He went off one year to college and came home. And it was we had the rule that if you live under our roof, please go to

mass with us, whether you go by yourself or you come with us. And it just got to the point where my husband and I just threw up our hands. He wouldn't go anymore. And I don't know what happened. It was just like it stopped just after college. He just decided he wasn't going to go to church anymore. (Olivia, G1-2)

For some reason, our sons just seem to have checked out after they got out of high school. One was married in a church and had their son baptized. The other one did not have any children baptized. But we have no idea why and this is so disheartening. But I don't think there's anything we did wrong. (Layla, G1-3)

A second area which the parents referred to several times was blaming outside influences on their children's disaffiliation.

And so, then during college, you know, he would go to church sometimes but and then eventually, as he was into his twenties, he would, you know, almost be like Christmas and Easter only. And then one time he missed Easter, which really upset me. (Sophia, G1-1)

So, the departure point is, you know, for at least for my three older kids was sort of the college time and the change of kind of a liberal, you know, awakening, if you will, that can take place in college. And that was a big part of it. And a secondary part was the divorce. You know, when my first wife and I were very active in the church. (Isaac, G1-4)

Now, I want to think of [my daughter] as a teenager. She was very willing to get involved. Once the associate pastor here left and the new priest was pretty dogmatic in terms of because I said so, and this is what we're doing, and questions were not really welcomed. But her experiences have not been happy when she came into her own self. And now she will ask me to pray for people. She will go to a funeral. She will go to a wedding in a Catholic church. She will receive communion. Other than that, she is totally disaffiliated. (Emily, G1-6)

Other observations of the children regarding faith practice touch upon tensions they may have with the church as an institution, some of its teachings, or the seeming contradiction that their children's moral lives stem from faith. Yet, they do not practice that faith and are ethical, upright individuals.

Well, you know, what he does in his free time is that he volunteers and helps poor black people who need help because he takes them to hospitals, he takes them to the store. He volunteers a lot of time taking care of people. So, he has three daughters and he's just I mean, he's just amazing with his three daughters, the way he loves them and the way they love him and his wife. (Claire, G1-1)

So, I guess and a lot like they had said before, a lot of reasons why at least two of my three have fallen away is because, you know, the Catholic views on same-sex attraction, the Catholic views on women being on the altar or as priests, the priest not being able to get married, the same social issues that I think 99 percent of Millennials wonder about. I do too. (Piper, G1-7)

Finally, this theme lacks good communication between parents and their children regarding their Catholic faith and how that moves forward in their lives. It touches the issue of what faith talk looks like overall and how the family speaks together about the faith they share.

I was never good with talking about faith, talking about a relationship with God. I never prayed with my kids. I did journal to my daughter when she was a baby and journal some faith topics. I've never shared that with her. And I was always like that. (Lilian, G1-3)

We talked more at our kids about faith than with them. (Claire, G1-1)

My daughter stopped going to church after confirmation and we never really talked about it. (Evelyn, G1-2)

In their gradual departure there was an awkwardness in sharing her feelings about church with Mom... I never had the courage, but I would like to talk with my daughter with what she really believes in. (Charlotte, G1-6)

#### Parents Cope with Tensions of Disaffiliation in Various Ways

Previously mentioned was the little or no inquiry as to why their children stopped engaging in church practice for many of these families, often out of not wanting to upset one another. Because parents were hesitant to inquire very deeply the cause of this behavior, their concern caused by the lack of understanding into their children's disaffiliation sometimes resulted in disappointment, guilt, and as one parent remarked, "disheartenment." On the other hand, for another parent, it seemed an "untouchable" subject. (Charles, G1-4).

And when they remember me, when I'm long gone, they'll remember. You never know. You don't know what God has planned. So, I'm trying to do that. But at the same time, it's still hurts. If something brings you such joy, you obviously want that for your children so that experiences of them letting go and pulling away is just very painful. (Charlotte, G1-6)

Others coped by harboring some underlying belief that one day their children will return to church practice, or they seek answers within themselves as why the disaffiliation occurred in the first place.

My son, he just kind of like went away. He went like the way of the world, like the prodigal son. Yeah, he's I mean, we've always prayed the rosary with our kids, and we've always done what we've always told them about Jesus and he's going to come back too. I do believe that. (Alan, G1-1)

But now there is a lot of diverse information, a lot of arguing about religious issues, et cetera, so kids at this age know lot more about this. And they're getting more information versus all the positive reinforcement I used to get when I was a kid in my little bubble. They are taking in all this different information and trying to make sense out it. (Charles, G1-4)

Presently, the participants see the tension of disaffiliation influencing their relationship with the children's families and specific concerns for their grandchildren.



His wife (their daughter-in-law) had no religious background at all. And so, that has a great deal to do with religious influence. For example, they haven't had their daughter baptized or anything (Leticia, individual interview)

Yes, what bothers me is that if they have children, that they will then pass that on to them, to their child, to their children. But that said, his wife had no religious upbringing, but she has the same values. So, you know, it can happen. They're very good people somehow. Church structure doesn't mean to them what it does to us. (Noah, G1-5)

I can say that with my husband when we were struggling, and we didn't have much. I knew that I could pray when he was looking for a job. I just prayed like all day, every day. And I had hoped. What upsets me is that my son and my daughter are not conveying that to their children. Do they have hope? That's what I'm wondering. I don't know if they have hope like we do. (Madison, G1-4)

I would like them to be baptized. And then my 16-year-old granddaughter was baptized, but she chose not to have confirmation. And she's a wonderful girl. You know, I think if she were well led in the right direction, she would pursue that, but her mother and father don't, you know, don't they don't push it so, they don't even make it available.(Charles, Individual interview)

But you certainly had this feeling you missed these things that you would hope to share with them on a deeper level with my grandchildren. I am trying to figure out what my role is with them and how far I can go to share my faith without overstepping the bounds.(Charlotte, G1-6)

Another concern as they cope with their children's disaffiliation is around their relationship with Jesus Christ.

...by understanding what Jesus taught and did, I hoped they would totally embrace it. I know [my daughter] has shown so many signs of the Beatitudes, she loves the Beatitudes without knowing she's living the Beatitudes. I know that she's involved in the works of mercy without necessarily calling it, oh, I'm a Catholic because I do this. It's not tied down to being connected to the church. It's who I am as a Catholic as God has helped me to evolve. And I think we're all going to keep on evolving. (Charlotte, G1-6)

One of my biggest concerns is that they would never get to know the historical Jesus and the beauty of the teachings, you know, particularly his teachings on the Sermon on the Mount. (Patrick, G2-8)

There's so much they're missing out by not knowing Jesus, knowing his personal love for them, you know? It doesn't matter to me what church they go to. I don't care if they become Catholics again or go to another church just as long as they know a personal relationship with the Lord. (Sophia, G1-1)

Some attempted to take an active role in faith formation if their children allowed them to.

We try to nurture faith in our grandchildren in which the parents have an objection. (Alan, Individual Interview)

We try to teach our grandchildren the faith in simple ways, in the way we teach the prayers and about Jesus' life. (Layla, G1-3)

My son wants me to share my faith with my grandson. (Eliona, G1-7)

My nephew was not baptized, so I secretly did it myself. (Olivia, G1-2)

Finally, conversations on institutional church issues had a challenging effect on their children's desire to remain engaged in church practice. Coping here meant to live with the unanswered questions that these experiences engendered. They included clergy sexual abuse and issues around the same-sex attraction.

The local priest was accused of sexual abuse and that complicated things for my children. (Charles, individual interview) My son's issues with the church stem from the clergy abuse cases. (Leticia, individual interview) The sexual abuse crisis made it hard to separate faith from what happened in the church. I did not have answers for my kids. (Charlotte, G1-6)

My oldest son is gay, and he grew very uneasy with the church position on the LGBTQ community. (Anne, G1-5)

In sum, from this large amount of interview material, I organized codes around four overarching themes. In the first theme, generation one conversations centered around the experience of these parents who invested a great deal in the faith formation of their children. In some circumstances, they attempted to instill faith in their children through the traditional means of religious education, sacramental preparation, and home prayer and rituals. In the second theme, these parents spoke of the challenges of passing on the faith to their children and how they began to perceive their departure from church practice. The third theme participants shared various points of tension felt within families where the faith was essential to the parents, but not to the children. Finally, the fourth theme attempted to gather experiences of the numerous ways they tried to cope with the tension of disaffiliation with their children. In the next chapter, we turn our attention to the other side of the coin, interviews with those who disaffiliated from Catholic Church practice, some of whom were the children of generation one participants (5 or 24%) included in this chapter.