

CHAPTER V

GENERATION TWO: DISAFFILIATED CHILDREN

This chapter elicits the voices of the disaffiliated. Unlike affiliated parents and grandparents recruited through parishes or other archdiocesan structures, these participants, who grew up in the Archdiocese of Boston, have moved to various parts of the state and country, with one individual living in South Africa. They are twenty-one individuals who volunteered for the study through advertising done in the local secular press and on social media platforms and word of mouth.

Of the twenty-one respondents, five (24%) are children of generation one Catholics who participated in the study. One is the child of a Catholic parent who was also later disaffiliated from the church. Of the twenty-one participants who received the link for the survey information, twelve (57%) responded, providing enough demographic data to make general observations about the entire group. Out of twenty-one, thirteen (62%) were interviewed in two focus groups and individual interviews. At a particular point, contact with other 38% of the original participants discontinued contact as the study continued, and a pandemic ensued. Nevertheless, these thirteen in-depth interviews still provide an exciting window into their disaffiliation stories.

The issue of disaffiliation or de-conversion, which is the process of moving from identification and active engagement with Roman Catholicism to disaffiliation and disengagement, are significant experiences in contemporary American Catholic life.¹ It has been acknowledged at the highest levels for more than forty years. In 1975 Pope Paul VI observed: “Today there is a very large number of baptized people who for the most part have not formally renounced their Baptism but who are entirely indifferent to it. (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 56) Pope John Paul II said in 1990: “Entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer considers themselves as members of the Church. (*Redemptoris Missio*, 33) In 2013 Pope Francis remarked: “We cannot overlook the fact that there has been a breakdown in the way Catholics pass down the Christian faith to the young in recent decades. It is undeniable that many people feel disillusioned and no longer identify with the Catholic tradition.” (*Evangelic Gaudium*, 70).²

In the teaching of the Catholic Church, those who consider themselves disaffiliated always remain part of the church by their baptism. Canon Law says, ‘Baptism incorporates us into the Church,’ furthermore, ‘seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual character of belonging to Christ. Nothing can erase such a mark.’ (*Catechism 1267, 1272*) This theological fact does not forestall the reality that the largest group in the

¹ Patrick Hornbeck, 1.

² Stephen Bullivant. *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II*. (London: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

Boston Archdiocese are non-practicing or disaffiliated Catholics.³ The group of disaffiliated individuals included in this study presents a small but rich understanding of what is entailed in this de-conversion experience concerning their families, church, social milieu, and more significant cultural dynamics.

Demographics

As with the affiliated participants in the previous chapter, these participants represent the larger population of the disaffiliated.⁴ Within this demographic subset, there is some homogeneity regarding race, education level, and income levels. What is interesting regarding age, this small subset presents two different generations from age 22 to 55. Disaffiliation is popularly thought of as an issue for Catholic emerging adults, and it certainly is. But the age spread shows the intergenerational dynamic of disaffiliation that is more recent for some and has lasted a long time for others.

Education is a prized cultural value locally in this area. It is reflected in the high educational levels. Some research lends credence to the idea that higher education levels among the disaffiliated in these families may be one factor that leads to a diminishment in religious observance.⁵ What emerges in the data analysis are the high moral values and sense of service that represents the parents' remarks of their disaffiliated children, despite them not attending church. In addition, the dominance of community and social service employment over other types of jobs may exhibit their service-orientated lives.

Religious identity may refer to personal preferences or cultural upbringing, but not necessarily religious practice. A significant percentage of the disaffiliated in the study still identify themselves as Catholic, but not exclusively. Christian and non-denominational identities are also substantial and just as effective as those who profess no religion to a particular institution. That said, more than 66% do not consider religion important. More than half have had no formal Catholic education but were involved in religious education, mostly CCD (66%). About a quarter participated in extra parish activities in youth ministry (25%).

Gender	
Female	50.00%
Male	50.00%
Age	
18-24	16.67%
25-32	41.67%
35-44	33.33%
55-64	8.33%
Race or Identity	
White or Caucasian	91.67%
Hispanic or Latinx	8.33%

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ "In America, Does More Education Equal Less Religion?" Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, May 30, 2020. <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/26/in-america-does-more-education-equal-less-religion/>.

Marital Status	
Separated or divorced	8.33%
Single, never married	33.33%
Married	58.33%
Education level	
Some college or trade	16.67%
College degree	16.67%
Post graduate work or degree	66.67%
Total income last year	
Between \$30,000 & \$50,000	8.33%
Between \$50,000 & \$75,000	16.67%
Between \$100 K and \$150 K	16.67%
Over \$150 K	16.67%
Current Occupation	
Computer and Mathematical	8.33%
Architecture and Engineering	8.33%
Community and Social Services	16.67%
Legal	8.33%
Educational	8.33%
Present religious identity	
Catholicism	58.33%
Christianity	25.00%
Judaism	8.33%
Islam	8.33%
Buddhism	8.33%
Hinduism	8.33%
Inter/non-denominational	16.67%
No religion	16.67%
Other	8.33%
How important is religion to you now?	
Extremely important	16.67%
Somewhat important	16.67%
Not so important	66.67%
Catholic Education	
Catholic elementary	16.67%
Catholic high school	8.33%
Catholic college or university	16.67%
None of these	58.33%
Involvement in religious formation and activities	
Catholic religious education (CCD)	66.67%
Youth ministry	25.00%
Catholic campus ministry	8.33%

TABLE 2

Data Analysis

The research of *generation two* centered around focus groups and individual interviews, where focus groups were not feasible for the participants. As was the case for generation one, *thematic data analysis* was used to highlight quotes provided by the transcriptions of the interviews.⁶ The questions began with their perspective of their religious upbringing and how their sense of Catholicism changed over time. Next, the key research questions attempted to investigate the areas of their Catholic faith that were

⁶ Peele, *ibid.*

problematic and elements of that faith that they may still retain, and why that was the case. Finally, how do they interact with their parents and other family members regarding their disaffiliation experience?

The emerging themes chosen for the research focus at this part of the study have some similarities with affiliated parents and grandparents and crucial differences. So it is because the interview questions looked at some of the same issues of Catholic de-institutionalization through families. These themes include a) Growing in and out of Catholicism; b) Handling tensions with parental expectations; c) Bringing hybrid Catholicism on new pathways.

Growing In and Out of Parental Catholicism

The early experiences of faith of those interviewed were as diverse as the experiences of the affiliated parents in the previous chapter. Even though less than half were not involved in a formal Catholic education, most engaged in the formal religious education program for sacramental preparation. At church and at home, in their social environment and extended family, their Catholic experience was marked by very optimistic and challenging experiences.

When I was growing up and going to CCD and stuff like that, my parents were very involved in CCD. My mother actually taught CCD for a number of years. It was very helpful, and she was very involved in my life as a young Catholic. (John, individual interview)

My Mom grew up in a very strong Catholic environment, so I see a root of my life in Catholicism because I was raised in it in a strong way through my Mom. But so anyway, it was very strong and part of my life. From ages, whatever, three to probably 14, and it meant being an altar boy, being a lead altar boy, maybe even thoughts of priesthood at some point. But boy, that fell apart at about fifteen. (Damien, individual interview)

For some, growing up Catholic was often seen as a positive experience that awoke a strong spiritual intuition. However, that was not the case for others. Friends from other faiths that were important had some impact as well. At an early age, some had meaningful religious experiences.

I prepared for confirmation, and I went into that willingly and happily, you know, I was I taught summer Bible camp, which was like an amazing experience with the kids. There were times I mean, in college, I thought about a religious studies major. You know, I was recently working at BYU and got friendly with the theology department, and they wanted to take me in like I've always had this deeply spiritual sense. (Debbie, individual interview)

And I would go to church as kids, and it was definitely part of our lives. I mean, you know, I remember my mom teaching us our prayers and, like, pray every night before going to bed. I think that, in retrospective, going to church wasn't impactful. (Debbie, individual interview)

And then I knew also that there were kids that weren't going to Catholic Church, that were maybe going to other churches or services or weren't going to any

services. So, I sort of saw myself somewhere falling in the middle on this spectrum of how Catholic I really was. (Samantha, individual interview)

Things began to change as they became emerging adults and went from parental faith influence at home to college independence. That transition occurred in many ways as they began to experience a larger, more diverse world. As a result, disaffiliation could be a subtle drifting away or a departure from a largely positive experience into something altogether.

I was very involved in my church and when I went to college and did not have my parents there to say, hey, you should go to mass. Hey, we all went to mass, let's go. It just fell away when I moved from home and after college, when I moved on my own. I just never really got back into the faith end. (John, individual interview)

I know this is not just Catholicism, pretty much any institution in the world, you're going to deal with politics and hierarchy I just felt that church never felt like home to me. I taught there, which I loved. I loved working with kids, but it just didn't feel I had a place there that I guess that would tie me to the church. (Janice, individual interview)

I mentioned I just jumped around and the people I was with became my family. I went to the Lutheran church, and I went to the temple, and we went to by temple sometimes because it was so beautiful. (Janice, individual interview)

I had some kind of epiphany. I've heard people say like, oh, I was done with the Catholic Church after the sexual abuse scandals arose or I was done with it because of something a particular religious leader said or whatever. And I just it was not like that for me at all. It had been a largely positive experience. I met some really great people. (Cindy, individual interview)

Departure from Catholic Church practice was also precipitated by difficult experiences as well in the college years. Issues around perceived hypocrisy by leaders that represent the institutional church are noteworthy.

(At my college Catholic campus) there was the promotion of sanctity of holiness, but in a very, very critical manner of constantly being judged and criticized if you were not doing it the way that somebody else wanted you to do it. Then when Trump was elected in twenty sixteen, there was a plethora of harassment towards black students and Muslim students, and the administration did nothing. (Katelyn, individual interview)

This perceived sense of duplicity extended over other issues that predictably included clergy sexual abuse issues, stances toward the LGBTQ+ Catholics, mixed messages in a problematic political climate, the importance of women leadership, and the ambiguities around prenatal sexual ethics like abortion. Some of these are not mere abstract cases but touch upon their friendships and families.

There are a few things I find problematic with the Catholic Church, predominantly views on LGBT people. I know I've seen some things coming from Pope Francis that are very promising about LGBT teens and people growing up. I have a cousin

who is openly gay. I would see him, you know, he was one of the best friends growing up. But then I go to church and being gay is viewed as wrong. What do I do with that? (John, individual interview)

It's funny because obviously the big elephant in the room is abuse scandal. And obviously, I mean, that's hugely upsetting. Like, I think I've always had it clear in my head. It's not that being Catholic has anything to do with making someone an abuser. But I do think institutionally there was a lot of secrecy and cover ups, and it hurts. (Debbie, G2-1)

But I remember I sat in church one day and I looked to my mom and I'm like, how come none of the priests are girls? I was like, are you kidding me? I was so mad, and I was like seven, you know, that's not fair. And she's like, well, basically that's just the way it is. And I was like, well, I don't really like that. I have struggled for leadership in sports and academics as a woman and the contradictions with the church do not sit well with me. (Samantha, G2-1)

Handling Tensions with Parents Around Disaffiliation

Tensions with parents around life religious expectations from the initial stages in emerging adulthood that move perhaps into later adulthood are managed in various ways. It can range from little or no communication, and in so doing, avoiding conflicts, unspoken confusion, and resentment on one side, and guilt on the other. In other cases, some conversations may revolve around the distinctions between faith in God, Jesus and the moral life, and the institutional aspect of the church.

I no longer identify as Catholic, and my parents have reconciled themselves to this. They continue to practice their own faith in a parish. I think the difference is where I see where I reached my breaking point with stuff like that [in the church] They also are not big fans of some things in their parish, like their pastor. But they're still going and they're still putting the envelope in the in the basket. But generally, we really don't talk about important things. (Peter, individual interview)

My mother has this belief in all things like don't do that because that comes back to you. We always say that's the Catholicism coming back to bite you right in the you know, so if you do it, just know something else that's come around the other side like that, you know, of course, those type of things you but you are you always come back to OK, well, if you pray hard enough, it might come true. (Alicia, individual interview)

Definitely we did not disagree on some basic faith matters like when you die, you go to heaven, you know, some people will say to you, yeah, well, guess what gives you hope, right? (Alicia, individual interview)

So, I talk about it a lot with my parents. They're always very supportive and very helpful, but I think even they know that there comes a point where I think they just believe that it's something that I'm just going to have to work through. (Damien, G2-2)

Tensions and questions with their parents around their gradual departure from church practice were, at times, a negotiation of what they were willing to do with the

church and what they were not willing to do, and how that happened. In one example, the entire family was disaffiliated because of the negative experience of the mother formerly employed in the parish.

Generally, I have no problem with what the church teaches, but for me, church attendance does not need to be weekly in order to be a good person. It's all about being a good person, not an extreme approach. (Debbie, individual interview)

And so, when my mom passed away, there was no connection left really for me. Because she was Catholic, but none of my family who lives in town here, that's my dad's side of the family. So that was a big part of it, too, was just kind of like, you know, you keep going because I don't want to say it was just a sense of obligation, but it was something she and I did together. (Janice, individual interview).

I just jumped around with the people that I was with. They became my family. I went to the Lutheran church, and I went to the temple sometimes because it was so beautiful. And I think that's when I started really realizing that for me, my religious experience was dependent on community. It really had nothing to do with the church I went to or what religion I was, it was about feeling a connection to something larger with other people that you love. (Janice, individual interview)

So, it (the firing of her mother as religious education director) impacted our whole family because she was like, well, I got burned basically by the church. And she's not really interested in continuing with the church. She said, that's not Catholic to me. Right. So, we're not going either. (Samantha, G2-1)

The tensions felt retreating from church practice affected the families of the disaffiliated, particularly around the issues of non-Catholic spouses and the passing on of the faith to the grandchildren. They were warmly accepted and dearly loved by the Catholic parents. But it did provide experiences of doubt, silence, and concern on the status of the Catholic faith in their children's families, particularly for the grandchildren. The grandparent's need to share faith with their grandchildren in small ways was in the last chapter. What is interesting here, there is little reference to that among their disaffiliated children. Concerns about the Catholic faith in the grandchildren by their parents did not come up. Instead, the focus was on their non-Catholic spouses.

I don't know if that makes sense, but, you know, really, she (my wife) didn't grow up Catholic, her parents aren't Catholic. Her mom is Jewish actually, and her dad was raised Methodist. And so, everything that she knows about the Catholic Church is just what she's heard. I guess my concern would be that it may come back negatively on myself or my family. (Andrew, individual interview)

My church stopped with the religious differences in our marriage, and it was at that time that I stopped identifying myself as Catholic. (Peter, G2-1)

My wife is Baptist, and she is quite involved in her church. Her father is pastor of the church and is a very spiritual man. I loved bible study there and eventually considered myself Baptist, not Catholic. I am presently in the seminary to become a pastor. (Damien, G2-2)

Bringing Hybrid Catholicism on New Pathways

Here I brought together remarks of the legacy of Catholic faith after disaffiliation and bringing that to new spaces and identities (third spaces). In Catholic disaffiliation, there are often elements of Catholic identity that are retained and made part of new emerging identities of spirituality and faith. For some, this may look like a phenomenon that Paul Hedges calls *strategic religious participation*. However, through the lens of practical theology, it is not uncommon for spiritual-seeking adults to retain elements of different practices that make sense to them so that their understanding of Catholicism becomes a way to connect to other religious or spiritual experiences.⁷

I would definitely say the Catholic Church helped found my morals. You know, like I said, I was very involved in the church. I was also very involved in the scouting movement when I was young as well. (John, individual interview)

When I think about if I still consider myself a seeker and whatever religious community that I find myself, I know that it will need to be sort of social justice oriented, and that comes from my Catholic upbringing. I grew up in a liberal Catholic parish. (Peter, individual interview)

It's the notion of agape in that God is almost like a verb, like God is this act of love that you see around you and God is in everything that you value. So that notion became very real to me. I've written down what I want to share with my daughter as she grows up and as she debates and looks at these questions and asks, you know, what are we when her Jewish family goes and takes a holiday or celebrates some event? (Beatrice, individual interview)

I still pray every night and I still pray in a very Catholic way. I guess I consider things like candles, the prayers, the music, almost more like centering. Rituals, if you will, and every religion has their own centering rituals. (Beatrice, individual interview)

I still pray to God, Jesus, and Padre Pio when I feel lost. (Katelyn, G2-2)

I don't care about how people feel about religion. There was a reason Catholicism and there's a reason Catholicism is and it's to help guide people to the sense of security, happiness, and safety in a very holistic way. But again, like I had said before, human error is a very powerful thing, and the church can distort what it teaches. (Damien, G2-2)

Some individuals in the study make connections that speak of a more significant spiritual identity from their Catholic upbringing. As one interviewee said, "I take my pieces of worship where I can and where I'm comfortable, and I leave the rest to somebody else to figure out, so it doesn't need to be in one particular place." Here are some perspectives of that synthesis for them.

⁷ Paul Hedges. "Multiple Religious Belonging after Religion: Theorizing Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a Chinese Model." *Open Theology*. 3. 10.1515/opth-2017-0005, 67. The author brings this east Asian model to other the realities of Western SBNR's and prefers to call it instead "strategic religious participation."

For me, that's what it is. I feel best and I would most spiritual and connected serving a higher purpose when I'm doing service or when I'm getting the vote out, or when I'm joining an effort to, you know, marching for Black Lives Matter. (Janice, individual interview)

And honestly, I mean, to me, that is if there's one message that I would have, it's I am 100 percent confident in any world where there is a higher power. I'm 100 percent confident that I'm fine and I'm happy with what I'm doing right now. (Janice, individual interview)

It's enjoyable to share experiences that are spiritual with others, like my sister-in-law who is a Wiccan. So, I don't see them as much as I used to. But when we're together, if there's like a ritual going on, like a pie holiday, you know, we'll do a ritual together. (Beatrice, individual interview)

And, you know, those holidays, even though it's probably not the right thing, at least I go back to church and touch base just to make sure that God knows I'm here, I'm still here. (Alicia, individual interview)

We are all a piece of God. So that is how we should be treated. And it's like, yes, I am Buddha. You are Buddha. We are. But I am glad you are. I don't know. It's like it's just, you know, of course we're all sons of God anyway. That's just me. Stream of consciousness. (Debbie, G2-1)

So, it's like you're given pieces to this looking glass as you go through your faith. But it comes little by little because the things that I would have been taught at high school would not make sense, or the things that I would have been taught now or maybe five years down the road would not make sense if I were given those pieces in high school. I have to go through these journeys. (Damien, G2-2)

And me being human, I have the luxury of saying who I want to be with and who I don't. And so, I still don't consider myself Catholic because I don't go to church and I don't, you know, celebrate the traditions. And I don't necessarily read the Bible consistently, but I still have a lot of faith and a lot of trust in in God and in Jesus and all of the saints that gave their life to humanity. But just knowing that there is just some differentiation that maybe I'm just going to have to be OK with, because at the end of the day, we're still all humans and we still hold our prejudices. (Katelyn, G2-2)

I spoke of the disaffiliated participants of this study by beginning with what Catholic disaffiliation is and how it was understood in the church in the church's authority from 1975 until the present. However, departures from the church since the early sixties were significant. I introduced three predominant themes that express underlying experiences in all the interviews and demographics reports. First, growing up Catholic and growing out of Catholicism for various reasons raises tensions and challenges in their relationship with their parents, which works out quite differently for each participant. Yet, their Catholic faith was not wholly abandoned.

On the contrary, it is an integral part of shaping who they are in fundamental ways. For some, their Catholic faith became a springboard for other spiritual experiences and a standard for a sense of belonging in communities elsewhere. For others, it is still the place

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and point where they connect with their families. The following chapter looks more deeply at a comparative exploration of these two diverse family narratives.