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# CHAPTER VI

## MULTI-GENERATIONAL CATHOLICS, MULTIPLE VIEWS OF FAITH, MEANING, AND BELONGING

In my conversations with Catholic parents and their children who have not found a lasting home in the church, the first impression is that the Catholic faith experience of parents and grandparents is not altogether different from the religious formation of their children. Just as disaffiliated Catholics find themselves in a pluralistic world with the practice of the Catholic faith as one option among others that may hold more satisfaction, their parents and grandparents spoke of similar circumstances. One parent may be more consistent with the relationship with the local parish, often the mother. They experienced faith formation not only in religious education programs and youth ministries of parishes but also with extended families and friends. Usually, it meant consistent mass attendance; other times, it did not. There was in place, to one extent or another, a flexible Catholic culture in a larger context by which people navigated their faith experiences through their families.

### The Catholic Family Culture of Disaffiliation

I wish to consider the *family culture of disaffiliation* on the broader lens of intergenerational disaffiliation and its changing relationship to the institutional Catholic Church. The notion of Catholic family culture has some affinity to psychotherapeutic theories of *family systems*. It generally refers to what goes on at the family level, rather than merely examining individual members. It approaches family dynamics of communications, transactional patterns, conflict, separateness and connectedness, cohesion, and adaption to stress.[1] In Catholic family culture, disaffiliation is understood within a more extensive, intergenerational dynamic in the way families share beliefs and values in relation to the local parish.[2] By considering Catholic families as a system or culture, I look beyond the individuals who left church practice to understand the more prominent family dynamics that may nurture and cope with the stress of disaffiliation.

The first and second-generation themes discussed in chapters four and five co-relate incongruent and conflictive ways. These themes together outline one way of understanding family disaffiliation dynamics. *Figure one* shows how disaffiliation works out in Catholic family culture. The first column is generation one, affiliated parents and grandparents. The second column is generation two and three, disaffiliated children and their children. Both experiences of faith, meaning and belonging, parental expectations,

[1] Karen L.Fingerman & Eric Bermann. "Applications of Family Systems Theory to the study of Adulthood." *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, Vol. 51 9l, 2000, 9.

[2] Ibid, 10.

and children's expectations and their interrelationship make up the family culture of disaffiliation.

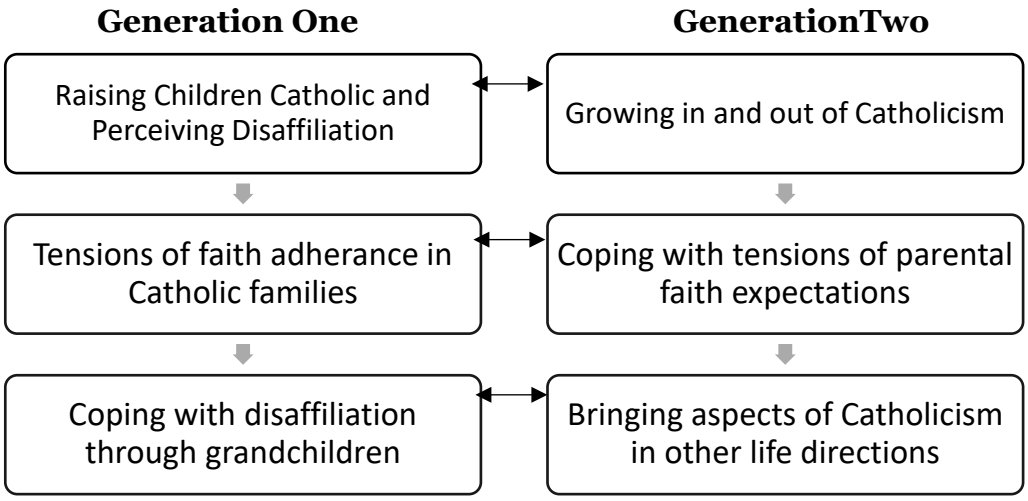


**FIGURE 1**

*Figure one* shows how disaffiliation works out in Catholic families of this study. The first column is generation one, affiliated parents and grandparents. The second is column generation two, disaffiliated children. Both experiences, parental expectations and children's expectations, and their interrelationship make up the Catholic family culture of disaffiliation. (1) In the first row, the efforts of parents to raise their children Catholic, which in the initial years of childhood, were received without difficulty. The relationship between parents and children in this regard is affirming and harmonious. However, this changes as the children approach emerging adulthood, where they are negotiating the faith of their parents with their own need to assimilate and own this faith. (2) The second row depicts the movement of hope in their children's Catholicism that leads inevitably to tensions with the choices of their children that lead away from church practice, initially in small matters. In response, the children find ways to cope with their parent's disappointment. (3) In the third row, as things develop and their children marry and move into careers, some grandparents find ways to bring the Catholic faith to their grandchildren as the parents may not be involved but allow the grandparents to do so. Again, however, this is not a consistent experience. However, some generation two parents may welcome the catechesis of the grandparents, valuing aspects of their Catholic faith. Still, they may also want to expose their children to other spiritual experiences while exploring them for themselves.

This family culture of disaffiliation plays out this way in general: Disaffiliation (1) is often a process, (2) sometimes involves multiple variables at work simultaneously, (3) is often linked back to a family context where each generation progressively became less religious and as a result, religion plays less of a role during one's upbringing, and (4) often comes to fruition when the individual becomes more independent from the original family household physically spiritually (when religion becomes seen more as a choice when disagreements arise about the Catholic faith when the individual enters into contact with less religious friends, and with life transitions). Of course, this does not mean that disaffiliates do not adopt elements of the Catholic faith, though admittedly, by most

indicators, they are far less involved in church practice than those who hold a religious affiliation. Moreover, their remaining religiosity may further decline with each successive generation. That said, re-conversion is also a possibility, according to the broader research. [3]

## Family Culture, Parish Culture, & the Wider Secular Culture

The dynamics of the Catholic family culture of disaffiliation do not occur in a vacuum, of course. Instead, there are dynamic relationships with the parish or church culture and the broader secular culture, which is the reality of all Catholic families. Together, all three cultures constitute *the more comprehensive social and religious configuration of disaffiliation*. Based on conversations in focus groups and interviews, those relationships could be represented thus:

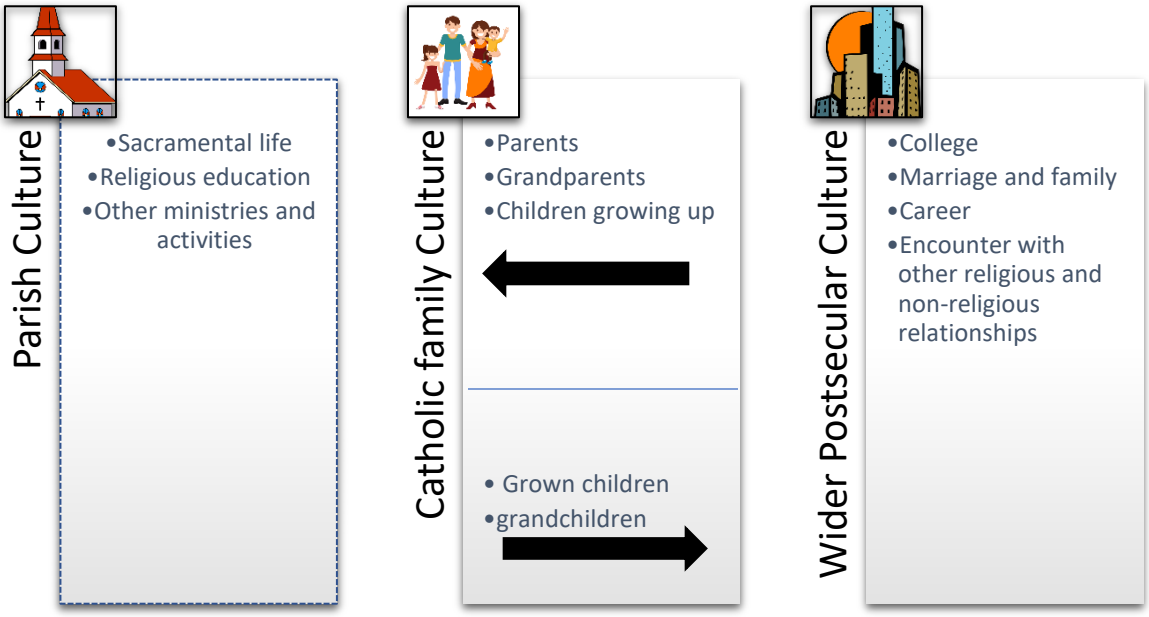


**FIGURE 2**

Disaffiliation family dynamics are understood within wider relationships that influence faith, meaning, and values, and belonging, notably the *parish culture* where the family is members. I call it a culture because it provides a community where faith symbols, rituals, and activities create meaning for the community. The center of sacramental life is celebrated in the mass, the sacrament of reconciliation, and other sacraments that mark significant life stages, initiation into the Christian community, marriage, ordination, and the sacrament of anointing of the sick. In addition, religious education, faith formation opportunities, and the critical friendships and service opportunities they engender make significant faith resources for families.

The interviews that spoke of the importance of parish life for parents and their desire to raise their children showed up in providing Catholic education opportunities,

[3] Joel Thiessen & Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme. "Becoming a Religious None: Irreligious Socialization and Disaffiliation." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2017) 56 (1): 77,79.

involving their children in youth ministry activities, and enrolled in religious education and sacramental initiation. Participation in the Eucharist was particularly noted. As one parent stated: "We wanted our kids to know that faith is important." (Leticia) This same parent said: "In our day, Catholic culture was experienced in multiple ways, today not so much." The parish became the only source of Catholic support and not the larger community. In *figure 2*, The arrow pointing toward the church for the parents visualizes this critical relationship. As a family, this relationship was as significant as their children were growing up.

The other meaningful relationship to Catholic families is the *wider secular and multireligious (post-secular) culture* where both parents and children are deeply involved. Secular principles and norms undergird legal, economic, political, and social institutions. These families live their religious faith in this secular milieu and multireligious neighborhoods. Parents are much more tethered to the parish culture than their children are generally. They live with both the parish and secular culture but use the parish culture as a source for their religious faith, meaning, and sense of belonging.

On the other hand, the children had a relationship with the parish that grew weaker as they became emerging adults. At the same time, their relationship with the wider secular culture grew more robust. Whatever relationship they may have with their parish, if any, becomes nominal at best. Thus, disaffiliation from the Catholic faith has its source in three fundamental deeply intertwined experiences: family, church, and the impact of the larger post-secular culture.

## Family Between the Faith/Secular Generational Divide

For a growing population, being religious today in the United States may no longer be about belonging to a particular religious tradition, like Roman Catholicism. However, for millions of people, it still is. In a sense, belief in God and particularly participation in church tradition has become one option. However, they also experience hyphenated religious identities where people choose certain spiritual practices and teachings, but not necessarily what religions believe in. That is the case with all the disaffiliated in this study. One of the disaffiliated interviewees, for example, calls herself "Catholic-ish."

Secularity, secularism, and secularization are distinct realities with a great deal of interrelation. In the Middle Ages, being secular referred to priests who worked out in the world in local parishes and not as monks in monasteries. To this day, we call Catholic priests who collaborate with local bishops in parishes secular priests. In the centuries that followed, what it meant to be secular began to separate itself from religious authority definitively, starting from 18th-century enlightenment. The two revolutions of the 18th century, the American and the French, produced two intellectual and constitutional traditions of secularism, or separation of church and state. In this study, I am not referring to secularism but to secularity, which involves individuals and communities in their philosophical convictions about their lives and the world, unattached or loosely attached to any sense of religiosity or religious institution. How they relate to

communities and national entities may affect secularism and secularization, but their secularity is about their identity.[4]

Many Catholic families may find themselves caught in between their commitment to their parishes and the demands of the broader secular culture, increasingly perceived as conflictive. On the other hand, their children and grandchildren gravitate not toward the parish for a sense of spirituality and meaning, as they did as children, but toward the broader *pluralism of choices* of faiths and spiritualities, relationships and lifestyles they do not find in the parishes. The dividing line is generational and certainly not new in our time.[5] In this tug of war within Catholic families, the church must readdress our relationship with the secular.[6]

## The Institution of the Church and the De-churching of the Family

With all its merits and problems, the parish community is the principal place for many Catholics to find support. For those in this study, it was often not a direct path through Catholic parents for *generation one*, although for some, it was. Others found a "home" in the parish community through many diverse avenues: finding an alternative to a difficult life at home (Lilian); faith life that revolved around the church as there was nothing at home (Ava); going from Catholicism to born again, and returning through marriage (Olivia); positive relationships with priests (Leticia); fathers and mothers who may not have attended mass but made sure their children did (Grace, Leticia); where parents were diverse faiths or coming from other faiths to Catholicism (Riley, Evelyn). Thus, the church is not merely an institution with creeds and norms but the central place for personal growth, friendships, and support for themselves and their families.

These parents hoped to show their children that faith needed to be an important portion of their life (Leticia). Yet with the disaffiliation of their children in one way or another, their concerns for them have significantly heightened. If they do not come back to church, will they lose their faith completely (Grace)? Some hold fears that life's difficulties will be more complex without their faith (Ava). Some concerns go beyond the lives of their families to their sense of eternal life and wondering if they will be united with their children and grandchildren. There are also concerns that they would never really come to know Jesus of the gospels, the source of strength and hope (Charlotte, Patrick). For them, all of these and more are matters that can only be satisfied within the church.

Yet, as concerned parents and grandparents for their disaffiliated children and their families, *generation two* does not seem to be concerned about these matters in the same way. Yet, many of them grew up in positive church experiences. They developed essential friendships in church and followed their parents unquestioningly in church practice (Samantha). Some set a "deep spiritual sense" and retained an interest in Catholic practice up through college (Debbie). Yet, their transition from Catholic practice to other paths raised their anxieties as well. Some feel a sense of "guilt," wondering if their

[4] Dr. Barry Kosmin & Ariela Keysar, eds. *Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*. (Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, Trinity College, Hartford, CT), 2007, pp. 1-3.

[5] Robert D. Putnam & David E. Campbell. American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us. (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2010), 132.This pivotal study looks at the succession of intergenerational disaffiliation since the early sixties to the present, with each successive generation becoming less attached to religious institutions.

[6] Massimo Faggioli, *Catholicism & Culture*. (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017), 131-132.

parents are happy with their choices (Cindy). Yet, for others, their disaffiliation had no discernible effect their relationship with their parents. accept it, even though disappointed (Peter).

This complex matrix of family experience, emotion, and aspiration the family was often bewildering for the parents because of the assumptions that experience of growing into the faith also be their children's experience. The unspoken gulf between the church and rest of their lives spoke volumes of their intense involvement in the larger secular culture they live in and a diminishment of their relationship with church, which began while still attending mass. The Catholic faith experience of *generation two* became a jumping-off point for other choices outside of the Catholic experience, yet elements of that tradition that was part their experience with them. The reasons transition may be better understood through insights from some of the extensive research that has already done. Culture and societal change an entirely different context for faith between the generations.


## Creating Different Relationships with Religion

There are common cultural contours that help us understand young adults and older across different relationships with religion that are pretty diverse. *The Pew Research Center* recently designated seven groups from highly religious to non-religious in its new religious typology[7] This new typology classifies Americans into seven groups, broadly speaking, based on the religious and spiritual beliefs they share, how actively they practice their faith, the value they place on their religion, and the other sources of meaning and fulfillment in their lives. This typology is a generalized way to understand the variety of disaffiliation experiences there are. All of those disaffiliated in this study may fit in a number of these categories. It is important not to overgeneralize the "unchurched" and to understand that people may experience diverse ways of religious identification at the same time.

[7] Pew Research Center, A Look at our New Religious Typology, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/29/religious-typology-overview/ Accessed March 19, 2019.

## A Generation of Tinkerers

The single word that describes young adults' approach to religion and spirituality and indeed life opportunities is in the experience of *tinkering,* coined by the sociologist Robert Wuthnow. He says, "a tinkerer puts together a life from whatever skills, ideas, and resources are readily at hand." Research shows the key to understanding the tinkerer is through the experience of uncertainty. For them, it is sufficiently confident that pre-defined solutions are not enough. The tension that permeates our culture makes tinkering necessary for our younger generations. What at first seems like a straightforward orthodox belief, such as the view that the Bible is inerrant, turns out to be a mash of orthodoxy and relativistic assumptions about truth, salvation, and civility. Each person claims authority. A metaphor used quite often is that of spiritual seeking.[8]

**FIGURE 3**

## Influences that affect the worldviews of Disaffiliated Adults[9]

*Hybridity and multiple religious belonging*: Millennials are naturally interdisciplinary due to the availability of diverse cultures, opinions, and ideas through the internet. This generation faces more choices than any previous generation, including lifestyle choices, sexual orientation choices, religious choices, and others. They may identify with more than one religious worldview and may be hesitant to share them with others not to appear discriminatory. Many disaffiliated people have an essentialist or universalistic perspective that all religiosity and spirituality are good, but none get it right.[10]

*Education:* College and university education exposes young people to various worldviews, and during this exposure find themselves questioning the worldviews they brought with them. It is a time of experimentation and an opportunity to seek a flexible identity in the process, often in opposition to their families.

*Geographic nomadism:* There is a certain sense of impermanence by traveling and collecting experiences. There may be several job changes that may take them to distinct parts of the country. Committing to a church is very difficult. They seek novelty, freelancing, and remote work instead of a 9 to 5 job. Covid lockdowns have helped encourage this. Their social media illustrate the trend toward global nomadism. The diverse ideas that they receive inform their eclectic approach.

*Late Bloomers:* As a whole, Millennials are starting families later than in the past, not settling down or buying cars and houses, compared to previous generations. A third

[8] Robert Wuthnow. *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2007. 13-15.

[9] Stephanie Yuhas*. Losing My Religion: Why Millennials are Leaving the Church*. Chapter 8 of The Emerging Church, Millennials, and Religion: Volume 1: Prospects and Problems. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publication Publishers) 2018.

[10] Michelle Voss Roberts, in Religious Belonging and the Multiple says, "Hybrids, rhizomes, and fluids are the kinds of metaphors needed to theorize the complexities of multiple religious involvements. They circumvent vexing problems of essentialism, theological exclusivity, and institutional elitism. Hybrids reflect the contingency and dynamism of all religious identity. Rhizomes subvert the effort to find a single center (institutional, doctrinal, or liturgical) that defines identity. Fluidity offers the permeability of boundaries previously thought to reinforce the incommensurability of religions." 59.

of Millennials still live with their parents. These are critical factors for church attendance and affiliation. Those that are unmarried are less likely to attend religious services, and many are religiously unaffiliated. There are far fewer resources available to single emerging adults in parishes than families in general in parish life.

*Anti-Institutional Perspectives*: There is a deep distrust for traditional cultural institutions in general and religious institutions. Politics have helped make things difficult for many with rising college debt, dire predictions for long-range earnings, and the rising gap between the 1% and 99% that has fed a disassociation with politics (evidence in their voting record). Religiously, some social issues and the role of women in the church are in stark contrast to the views of many Millennials. Those that were wounded in the church through emotional and sexual abuse also evidenced this mistrust.

*Digital natives*: They are "digital natives"—the only generation for which these innovative technologies are not something they've had to adapt. Not surprisingly, they are the most avid users. It is a moment when Brené Brown's TED Talks on vulnerability and Taylor Swift's random acts of kindness go viral. It's a moment when virtual interconnectivity is more immediate than the 'real' world in some ways so that an American millennial feels more comfortable setting up a Kiva loan to a farmer in Kenya than bringing chicken soup to a neighbor.[11]

The diverse ways *generation two* relates to religion and its institutions comes from how American culture shaped them, the dynamics of family culture in their homes regarding faith, and their relationship with the institutional church. One underlying question church leaders and families may need to ask ourselves: *How can our parishes assist families in preparing young people to abide in the real world they live in with the gift of faith?* The evolving answers to this question will speak much because of our efforts to take the life narratives of the disaffiliated seriously.

## De-Churched Spirituality, Ritual, and Morals in Disaffiliated Families

One final area I wish to focus on from the interviews of these families and individuals is the perceptions of spirituality and morals understood in the disaffiliated family members and their relation to the church. They include prayer, ritual, and an overarching sense of justice and charity. Distinctions between affiliated parents and their disaffiliated family members in these matters' rests on the existential experiences of the community. In some instances, there seems to be a dichotomy between relationships in a local community and the overall institutional church. "I have no animus toward Catholicism or institutional religion, but I realized my religious experience depended on a (diverse) community, not on the church (as institution) (Janice)." Some remarked that this is also the mind of some parents as well. "Our parents were more spiritual than religious (Cindy)." Although generally, most of the parents value their sacramental spiritual practice within the church. One of the disaffiliated interviewees spoke of Catholic prayers she learned as something she still says while running (Alicia). Another prayer to God, Jesus, and Padre Pio when she feels lost (Katelyn)."

Along with alternative spiritual practices that are meaningful gathered from other traditions, what is striking is a sense of wholeness and completeness in their spiritual

[11] Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile. How We Gather. This first volume was supported by The Crestwood Foundation. www.howwegather.org

awareness. "Today, my spiritual life feels whole and complete (Damien)." "I have shifted to a new sense of self in a very positive way: appreciating religious experience but not exclusively needing it anymore (Cindy)." In this sense, some could still understand themselves as Catholic, but differently than their affiliated family.

This seismic change in the lives of Catholic families is not just a kind of rupture of "traditional religion" and "secular spiritualities." Still, it is also a demographic correction that may arise out of leadership failures in the Catholic Church and a comprehensive rejection of the activities, beliefs, and values associated with religions. Moreover, it is a profound resettling back into older patterns of religious affiliation that were already in place generations before the unusual uptick of affiliative practice in the 1950s.[12] The stories of growing up Catholic shared in this study verify these "pre-1950's" dynamics with their parents, and their grandparent's church practice was significantly inconsistent.

The lack of theological language for the majority of the disaffiliated who believe in God does not undermine their expressions of a "practical theology of immanent transcendence" that sets any divine engagement primarily in the concrete reality of the here-and-now, rather than a mystical bridge between God and humanity and a promised life eternal. The church and their parents would understand their language as secular with little claim to a divine relationship. In this sense, the religious and the secular need not compete with one another where different languages refer to common spiritual concerns. Yet, it is an obstacle to any faith talk in the family.[13]

This leads to a decisive point I want to make. Understanding spirituality, no matter how similar or different it may seem from the institutional church's perspective, is intimately tied to social justice. It is valid for the church, and religious and secular views of spirituality resonate. "As a seeker, no matter where I land, social justice is key (Samantha) (Debbie)." "Being spiritual for a higher purpose is all about doing service (Janice)." For many, the disaffiliated acknowledge their Catholic backgrounds for their social justice grounding. "Being involved in scouts helped me understand the importance of the moral life (John)." "My Catholic background formed my sense of justice (Peter)." The legacy of their Catholic faith was important in their sense of prayer and the spiritual, the power of ritual, and the link between faith and the contribution to the healing of the world and the enhancement of life through ethical, compassionate action.[14]

In sum, this chapter attempts to look at the data of first- and second-generation Catholics, affiliated and disaffiliated through the lens of pluralism, first by laying out the inter-relational dynamic of the *Catholic family culture of disaffiliation*, based on the themes from interviews. It views disaffiliation not merely as choices of individuals but shows the systemic way disaffiliation is born and sustained. This family culture understands itself in a more extensive relationship, pulled between the parish and the broader post-secular cultures. Within this larger framework, the binary debate of a religious and secular worldview collides within the family. Yet, the bleeding borders of the

[12] Elizabeth Drescher. *Choosing our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 247.

[13] Ibid, 248.

[14] Ibid.

sacred and secular are not contradictions necessarily, but opportunities to expand how we all understand and respond to faith and the kin-dom of God.