



Listening to Those who Left the Catholic Church



Report of Some Who Dissafiliated from the Church for the *Synod of the Church 2021-2023*

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Introduction

In 2017, St. Mary's Press, a popular Catholic publication company, instituted a study on disaffiliation among young Catholics.¹ The results were studied by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, along with other dioceses and religious congregations. About thirty-five of us, leaders in education and evangelization, were gathered afterward in Baltimore, Maryland to consider the pastoral implications of this study. The study revealed for us the richness, complexity, and nuance of the reasons for disaffiliation.

Rachel, one of those who participated in the study, when asked if she could be interviewed about young adults and their disaffiliation from the church, said, "Finally!" Another, Edward, at the end of the interview said, "I'm glad to tell my story actually finally. I have never really sat down and told anyone. Thank you for listening."²

To listen to the stories of those who left church practice should be essential and constitutive dimensions of what it means to be a *faith community*. But it is rare when those who struggle with the church for a variety of reasons, experience dialogue with family or the church where their doubts are heard without judgement. When I refer to the faith community in this context, I refer to two groups of people generally. The first are the *dwellers*, clergy and lay people who find a home in the sacramental life of the church. The second are *seekers*, that seek more authentic experiences of faith often not found in their church experiences.³ In the evangelical life of the church, seekers often are left to the periphery of the church, and the church remains in the periphery of their lives.

The Synod of the Church 2021-2023, initiated by Pope Francis offers an extraordinary opportunity to dialogue and listen to those who are disaffiliated from the Catholic Church, not as a problem to be solved, but an occasion for personal and communal discernment in order to fathom what God is saying to all of us, both dwellers and seekers. Although this is an important part of being a Synodal church for this occasion, the first recommendation of this report will be to make this accompaniment with seekers a habitual and ongoing discernment. Dwellers *and* seekers make up one ecclesial community where we need to ask the question that Charles Taylor offers, "Whom does the Church speak to?"⁴

The Xaverian Missionaries have been exploring these realities since 2012. We began, with our confreres in the United Kingdom, searching the dialogue between the religious and nonreligious in an international conference at our center in Coatbridge, Scotland in 2013, inspired by Pope Benedict XVI's program, *Courtyard of the Gentiles*. We held a similar conference at

¹ *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*. A Study in Collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). St. Mary's Press, 2017.

² *Ibid*, 7.

³ Published version. "Introduction," in *Seekers and Dwellers: Plurality and Wholeness in a Time of Secularity*. Ed. Philip J. Rossi. Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016: 1-13.

⁴ Charles Taylor, "The Church Speaks - to Whom?" in *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, ed. Charles Taylor, Jose Casanova, and George F. McLean (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research and Values in Philosophy, 2012), pp. 1-14.



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Rutgers University in 2015 in New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA. Since then, as we are developing a ministry of interfaith dialogue in the United States, we are expanding that dialogue beyond traditional institutional faith communities to also include the spiritual but not religious, and those seeking spiritual spaces outside of traditional faith communities. It is here that we meet many who have left not only the Catholic Church, but other Christian denominations, as well as Judaism and Islam.⁵

In 2020, under the auspices of the International University of Hartford for Religion and Peace, I started a research project on Catholic disaffiliation for a Doctor of Ministry program entitled: *Postsecular Catholicism: Toward a New Understanding and Pastoral Practice in Catholic Families with Disaffiliated Children in the Archdiocese of Boston*.⁶ This research became the basis for “The Catholic Disaffiliation Project” of the Xaverian Missionaries USA.⁷

On the occasion of the Synod, we invited ten men and women of various ages and backgrounds to share their stories of disaffiliation from the Catholic Church focused in our area of the metrowest area of the Archdiocese of Boston. We left the interviews open-ended and offered them space to tell their story without much prompting. They appreciated the opportunity to share their experience for the synodal process with the hopes that church leadership would listen carefully and heedfully to their experiences in the church. The names provided are pseudo names to protect their anonymity. We tried to maintain their own words as best as possible, with minor editing for flow and consistency.

Disaffiliation Narrative of Dorothy

Dorothy is a Catholic who received a Master's in Theology and was director of religious education for a local parish before she disaffiliated, along with her children through the relationship with the pastor.

So, what is my relationship with disaffiliation? I've been thinking about that and questioning if I'm technically disaffiliated or not. I think the fact that I'm not going to Church means I am disaffiliated, but I feel still pretty connected. I still try to keep up with what's happening in the Church, what's happening in the US Church, what's happening in the global Church. I like to read certain newsletters and websites and whatever, to sort out what's happening. And I try to hear both sides, although I'm a little bit frustrated by some of the real angry right wing Catholic stuff that measures to see if people are Catholic enough. I'm sure I don't measure up to them, but that's my concern. So, I feel like I'm missing out a little bit. But I also feel like I have a little freedom to kind of look at things from a different lens from the outside of the church. And I like that because I think that is good for every organization, every group, every person to do some self-reflection. So, I was excited about the Synod. And then, as I said, I was concerned that I won't have a voice in the synodal process.

⁵ For information on the work of the Xaverian Missionaries USA in Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Dialogue see our website: Religious, Secular & Spiritual Dialogue - Xaverian Missionaries USA.

⁶ See thesis: [23 Post secular Catholicism: A New Understanding and Pastoral Praxis in Catholic Families with Disaffiliated Children in the Archdiocese of Boston](https://www.academia.edu/41111111/23_Post_secular_Catholicism:_A_New_Understanding_and_Pastoral_Praxis_in_Catholic_Families_with_Disaffiliated_Children_in_the_Archdiocese_of_Boston) | Fr. Carl Chudy, D.Min. - Academia.edu.

⁷ See website: [Home | Listening to Those Who Left the Catholic Church \(xaverianmissionaries.org\)](http://Home | Listening to Those Who Left the Catholic Church (xaverianmissionaries.org))



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I was a Director of Religious Education in a parish. I had completed my master's degree in religious education and theology at Boston College and the woman who was retiring from the religious education position in the parish had asked me to come on board and take her place. And I said I would, but I needed to get some more education. So, I did that. And then I came on, and she retired. And she was and is still a great resource for me.

We had a pastor who had been there for many years. And I love to think when he signed up to the priesthood, he imagined he lived there with five other priests, and everybody did the thing at which they were good. In his last years in the parish, he was all alone in his 70s and not exactly what he imagined either. He was surrounded by a bunch of ladies who probably drove him crazy, but he was very good to us. So, he retired, and the diocese sent a new priest. At the same time, my kids started going to high school in Providence, Rhode Island, which was a long way away. And I was working nights and weekends. And I had three kids in middle school and high school. So, it became really hard. And so, after the year, I said to the priest, I'm going to have to leave. And he said, okay. And found a person.

I got involved in contemplative prayer with Loyola Press and I did prayer workshops for them. And I got to do that with our students, which was just so powerful to do contemplative for little kids. Amazing. And so, Loyola asked us if we would do that for them, if we would reach out. I wasn't selling books. I wasn't doing any of that. I was just doing prayer workshops. And I was supposed to do one in Providence. And you needed a letter from your pastor saying you were in good standing and the pastor wouldn't sign it. And not only would he not sign it, but he also wouldn't talk to me or tell me why he wouldn't sign it or what the problem was. So, I called immediately, and he wouldn't talk to me. And then I sent him an email, and he responded back that he would have to have his lawyer talk to me. He had been advised by his lawyer not to talk to me. And that he couldn't go into any detail. And I thought, well, that's not being very pastoral, but if there was an employment issue, wouldn't it be your job to tell me what the problem was? But he wouldn't engage?

Not only would he not engage with me, but my daughter was in the confirmation program, and I was teaching it. And he didn't know that, apparently, and asked me to stop. Took me off of the child protective group. I was doing all those things still, and I had to stop. And my middle son, Greg was one of the older group leaders. They had some of those people in with adults teaching the confirmation class. And he and my daughter Sarah, who was in the program, decided to stay for the end of the year. My son Ben said he's never going back. At that time, he was perfectly rational. And my husband said he would never go back. And when Benjamin had his injury, we didn't hear from anybody at St. Mary's Parish. That was kind of how it started.

But then my other thought about that is I don't have a voice in the Church, even when I'm in the Church. I'm a girl, and now I'm not a regular *pay, pray and obey* kind of person. I probably never was. So, I'm really happy to have this chance to say what I've been thinking about. And I've been thinking that it's really time for the Church. And I don't mean to be disrespectful, but it is a Church of men, and they're getting older, and they are not in touch with the rest of the world.



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They're certainly not in touch with 50% of the population who are women, and they're not in touch with the younger people, except for the very conservative, some of whom are becoming the new generation of priests. 've been to so many events where they want us to pray for vocations. And I think that the Holy Spirit already answered. We just didn't like the answer. That there are people who are being called and the Church doesn't want to see it. And I think those people are women or people on the outskirts of society.

What I love about that is to wonder who I think Jesus would be having dinner with? Those are the people. And when we talk about excluding people from Communion, it is as if we're going to protect Jesus from people. Jesus doesn't need protection from divorced people or gay people or other LGBTQ people. Jesus doesn't need that. Maybe the Church thinks the Church needs it, but I would disagree. But I think we've become so close minded, refusal to listen to others, and so uncaring. Like we say, we like the beatitudes, but we don't live them as a Church. We say we want to do good and not evil, but we do the evil. And I include myself in that. I'm not saying I'm perfect, but I think the first time I remember paying attention to the reading where Jesus is talking about the Pharisees and their long tassels, and they're just worrying about the rules and all that and missing out on what they're supposed to be doing. I knew immediately he was talking about our hierarchy, but I don't think the hierarchy ever heard that or saw it that way. And so, I think, how can you miss that message?

Disaffiliation Narrative of Thomas

Thomas grew up Catholic but eventually left sacramental practice in a growing search in his Christian faith. He recently received a degree in pastoral counseling and is active in the Protestant community with his wife, as well as another non-denominational church whose congregation is largely ex-Catholics.

Okay. Well, maybe I can start because I feel like I have different lives that have meandered through in different parts of my life. Maybe my reasoning back 30 years ago when I disaffiliated from my Catholic faith is different than what it would be now. So, I think I want to make that clear that it's certainly not one, two or three things, many kinds of things.

I would say that what's interesting to me recently is I've developed a greater appreciation of the Catholic Church, that is the rituals and repetitive prayers and things like that, which is interesting to me because that's probably my initial reason for leaving the Catholic faith. In the past, I did not like that, and I didn't see the value in it. I actually kind of haven't done an about face about it or anything like that. I plan to remain in my Protestant tradition. But I think I've gained some greater perspective on the need for it, and reverence of it. I think that it was an important part that was missing. I feel like it's been a journey. So, yeah, I will start with the fact that repetitive prayers, doctrines, and other sorts of disciplines are a little bit overbearing, and they can lose their purpose.

When I did discover other denominations that did not use those forms of prayer or use disciplines as in the Catholic Church, it just freed me. And I think freeing is a good word to put it, and it freed me to have a relationship with God, the Father, the Creator. Before my disaffiliation I didn't know that. I didn't know God in that way, that I could have a close, intimate relationship



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with God. And I do think that the Catholic Church didn't invest in that part of it. You have a relationship with God who is this amazing spirit that exists and created you and created all things. So, yeah, I think that's probably a pretty strong point for me moving away from the Catholic Church.

I am grateful for my Catholic upbringing. But then again, it just became so repetitious. I had to go because my parents told me, you have to go, we're going, you're going. When I approached my teenage years, I was a lead altar boy, and I had some aspirations even going into the priesthood. It was strong. But things changed along the way, as I struggled more and more what it all meant. Then came my first exit, but it didn't mean that it also was an exit from any kind of faith. I never really left faith, so it took a little sabbatical, I think maybe. But my faith in God was always there, gratefully.

That was an interesting time period. And then I did start to look at other denominations. I met my wife, and I began to attend her Church and I was like, well, this is a lot different than my life as a Catholic, and I enjoyed it. This freedom of being able to connect with God directly was fundamental for me that I did not experience before. I think worship was another big part of it, the worship services became very important for me. I found a Church that really opened me up to more freedom, with people standing and sitting next to me. There are people that were somehow I felt that they were alike. So, there was a more of a community feeling from that Church like, we're all in this together and let's work towards greater knowledge.

I really believe the church is very different than when I was growing up and whenever the last time I was really participating. But just using scripture and being taught scripture, as opposed to the study of Catholic doctrines, the dogma, played a big difference for me. In my experience, there was no Bible. It was catechism. So, when I was able to get into scripture reading, that was it. That was everything for me. That's where my heart and my zeal became a real thing for me. Lord, I want to know more. Help me with this. Help me learn more every day.

Looking back there is another thing that does not sit right to me and that is the relationship with the Catholic priest. It is something that I believe is intimidating. They have to be careful walking around the pastor, as if they are walking on eggshells, so to speak. parishioners affected cannot be themselves. They need to be cognizant of what they think priests want them to be. And I think that's a really ingrained thing. I don't know how you change that. I think that's big. I think those experiences are relevant today, but perhaps not as much as in the past when I was younger. It's a roadblock.

Disaffiliation Narrative of Leticia

Leticia is a long time Catholic who recently disaffiliated from sacramental practice in light of LGBTQ issues and the church that affects her family in a particular way.

I've been Catholic born and raised all of my life. My parents provided us with lots of memories of involvement in the church and a lot of tradition around the Catholic faith. I can still remember my first parish, attending 40 hours devotions. One of my memories of being young, are the smells and the Church was full of priests because all of the priests from the whole area would come on that night. And I can recall that. I can still hear the chanting, their voices, in unison. My



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parents both taught religious education, were involved as church lectors. I went to Catholic high school, married in the Catholic Church, and then I raised my three kids within the Church, as my parents did. We never missed mass on Sunday. We didn't miss a Holy Day. I was that kind of parent. When we had soccer tournaments far away, we would find a nearby Church first. I taught religious education. For fifteen years I was a Eucharistic Minister. My kids were involved too. I just wanted them to have that sense of community and everything I got from it.

So that's my background. My Catholic faith has always been a part of who I am. And even as I got older, I found myself trying to dig deeper and understand more. And I probably got a little more involved in appreciating it than I did when I was younger. And of course, as my girls got older, they would start to question matters of faith as kids do today. They questioned everything. I looked at them and I wondered how smart and single minded they had become I just let people spoon feed things to me without questioning anything. And I didn't question if they told me that's how it was supposed to be, I just would say, okay. And I noticed that this generation is not so much that way. We've had a lot of conversations within our house. Sometimes I can give them answers. Sometimes they didn't like my answer. We would agree to disagree. Covid came and it was hard. We were trying to watch mass on TV every week, and it was hard to stay engaged. And then I would say early March 2021 is when I had my moment that started making me question things.

And when the Church reopened, I just didn't go back. And the event was when a letter from the Holy See came out on the blessing of homosexual unions in early March 2021, right up until that point, I always grapple with that issue within the Church. I definitely struggle with it. As an educator, I knew there were kids sitting in my classes who I knew were having difficulty, questioning around their LGBTQ identity, who they were and how they fit. I tended to not address it in class. And I think I was able to stay engaged because I would hear things that the Pope would say, or I would read things that let me believe there might be a sliver of hope or that some kind of different approach could someday happen. I'm not sure what. And after I read that article, I pretty much knew that probably wasn't a possibility. And I could no longer reconcile supporting that ideal.

When you raise your kids with the notion that God knew you before you were born. He knows every hair on your head. You are made for a special reason and there are no mistakes. And you've taught your child that. And suddenly it's not the truth. And they look at you and they say, Mom, it's not true. It's hypocritical. I'm not loved as I am. It's really hard as a mother because I felt like I lied and there was nothing I could say in return. They weren't wrong, in my opinion. So, it's just been really difficult and after witnessing this in my child I understand there's no one who chooses, in my opinion, to be persecuted, ridiculed, hated, and then they are asked by the church to not live a life that everyone else gets to live. And that is just hard.

I've stopped going to church fairly recently and I'm just floundering because my faith community was such a huge part of my life and I genuinely feel a gaping hole. My kids have all stopped going to Church. One of the hardest things was when my youngest daughter refused to go back to religious education. And she said, I will not be converted. And I pushed and tried to force it. And when she looked at me and said, I'm not going to stand up there and lie, I'm not going to pledge something, that would be dishonest in my life when I'm feeling the way that I am. So that



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was a hard one because my other two kids were both confirmed. But I have to listen to her voice, and it's all for the same reason. It's all kind of around that topic and subject of LGBTQ Catholics being unwelcome in the church.

Referring to my children, some come back at them using God as the reason to say you're awful. You're sitting and you need to find God. That's not the God I grew up with. So, I guess this is one of the reasons it was hard for me to continue to stay with the church, and my kids, I know for sure that it seems very hypocritical that you belong as long as you conform to what we say you're supposed to be. And I understand it's difficult. I know the history of the Church. I know that it is based on a man and a woman and having children. But I'm not looking for things to change. But I feel like there should be a way allow LGBTQ people who want to have the same experiences of faith that other people do.

I can see how kids can be confused, as I am. I can see that the church's messaging is confusing. You can go to one town and find a very understanding priest. You can be in your own parish where you have a priest that regularly gives sermons on how it's wrong and you're wrong. And I can see in Europe some of the things that are happening in Germany, and there's not even a sense of unity there. It's hard and I can't even celebrate the holidays. I'm lost because I said to my oldest daughter, I said, "I don't know how to pray anymore." She's like, Mom, you can still pray. And I said, but it feels like I don't know what I'm praying to because it was always affiliated with the Church. And she's like, mom, you can still be spiritual and pray until you figure this out.

The Church has been a home. And I don't know why we just can't find a way that there's just some kind of belonging for my daughters. I don't know. I understand this is worldwide. There's cultural implications even just within our country. I know depending on the region you live; Catholics down south may feel differently than Catholics up north. I know it's a multilayered thing. I just don't understand why we were all taught the great commandment, love your neighbor and we can't find a way of accepting LGBTQ Catholics. I know there's fear. I know when you don't understand something, it's hard. But when you know that you've had three children and you've raised them all the same and one comes to you one day and tells you I like the same sex. And, you know, they didn't get up one morning and just say it. It has been part of a long struggle for her.

And that's part of my problem. Why doesn't anybody speak out and say it's wrong for you to say you need to find God because as a gay person, you don't have him. There's no one speaking out and saying that the way these people are treated isn't okay.

Disaffiliation Narrative of Veronica

Veronica accounts for the treatment of their son who taught in a Catholic school and whom she feels was unfairly treated, prompting her and her husband to create distance between them and the church.

My husband and I have a son, and he was brought up Catholic. He received all his sacraments. And as he got in high school, he started trying to back away from the Catholic religion and just not practice anything. But we kept him engaged, like I said, until he got his confirmation, and then it was a struggle going forward with that. But until he got out of high school and went off to college, he still went to Church with us. But like I said, it was a struggle, funny as it may



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seem, he went to Providence College (Catholic College), and he absolutely loved it there. And when he was graduating, he thought there wasn't life after Providence College. He just thought that was the best. He went on to get his Masters in the classics at Tufts, and he studied in Rome. He studied in Greece during the summers. And when he graduated from Tufts with his Masters, he was offered a position at a Catholic high school in Wilmington, Delaware, and they really pursued him.

He was one of 36 candidates, and they wanted him, and he really felt very special because the priest that was teaching Latin was retiring, and they wanted someone to come in and revamp the Latin program and get kids more interested in taking Latin and so forth. So, he came in, and he worked from seven in the morning till seven at night. His first couple of years doing what they had wanted him to do, and he felt really great about it. And he taught there for three more years. And when the pandemic started, they went virtual, and he ended up teaching the last couple of months virtually. And then that following September, when they were supposed to go back, they decided that they were going back. And a lot of the teachers didn't want to go back in person because they didn't have the vaccine yet and it was still risky. And he has asthma really bad. So, he was doubly concerned about his health. They told him that would be fine, that they would hire a substitute for the entire year and that they would pay him for the first four months of that school year so that he could mentor virtually that teacher.

And he did that. And then when it came to renew his contract that May, the priest that's the principal called him up, had a virtual meeting with him, and said, we're not going to hire you back. We're going in another direction. And he was flabbergasted and shocked, he felt betrayed because the school considered him part of the family. It was very close knit. Kids go there for generations. And it was just the most wonderful place. And he really got attached to everybody. He started an ultimate Frisbee team while he was there, and he was doing great. But I think what it came down to was when they found out they could hire a substitute teacher to fall into place and do what he had set up, and it cost \$10,000 less a year, they let him go. He felt betrayed and was devastated. We were devastated. We were in shock. We knew the principal, he had us come down and stay at the Oblate Center when we were down there.

We felt very engaged and connected. Even though we were the parents of a teacher, they embraced us. So, we are just still kind of trying to get through that. My son is engaged, and he and his fiancé were planning to ask the priests of the school to marry them. And because this happened, and he feels so shocked and betrayed by the whole thing that that's not going to happen. He's not going to be married in the Church. And I feel that I can't anymore try to convince him to practice his religion anymore because my husband and I both feel devastated by the whole thing, and we haven't been going to Church either. We are both come from families that are many generations practicing Catholics, Irish and Portuguese. And I do genealogy, and I can trace my ancestry back to when my great grandparents came here from island in Portugal. They were Catholic, and I went to Catholic grammar school K through twelve. I lived one street over from the Church and from the Catholic school I went to, it was like, you grew up in that neighborhood. And I used to go to morning Mass every day, like when I was in second and third grade.

I feel now that I'm betraying my heritage of my generations of family that stuck it out, through thick and thin, as far as I know, with the Catholic Church. And I don't know how to



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overcome this, and I don't know how to make this better for my son. And before he lost his job, he had bought a house two days before. So, then that was a double whammy, not having a job. And the poor kid, he is now teaching in a school as a substitute teacher. And it's very difficult for him making ends meet to try to redo the house. That needed a lot of renovation more than he had expected. For a year now, he hasn't been able to live in that house. He's been living with his fiancée, sister, husband, and family, and now they're living with friends. So, it's just had devastating effects on his life and what he thought his life was going to be. And for us, too, when you couldn't go to Church because of the pandemic, when things weren't good, this priest that was the principal of the school, he would have Mass virtually twice a week.

I guess that's not what your Catholic religion is all about. But when you have such a close relationship with the Catholic school where my son taught, that's embedded in your religion, to us, it was very difficult. And quite frankly, my husband and I would not go to Church. We've been Catholics ever since we got married and moved to Holliston 46 years ago. We never miss Mass. And right now, both of us haven't gone back. We've cherry picked the masses we've attended. Like last Wednesday we went to Church, to try to ease ourselves back into it. But we still don't go to Mass on Sundays. And I feel guilty about it.

Disaffiliation Narrative of Kayla

Kayla's story is not a typical disaffiliation story. She did not stop practicing her Catholic faith, which is very important to her. In her words, she is "passionate about her faith." But she felt compelled to leave the parish and find an alternative for herself.

I had started a brown bag lunch and dinner program for the homeless out of our parish. And I had a challenging time getting the parish to support this program. We needed to help support the hungry in our community. There's a huge homeless population. And they said, well, there's other programs. I said, but why are we as a Catholic Christian community not supporting these programs? I used to do the Brown bag program on Art Street in Boston. And I said, why can't we do something like that? And I said, if I have to pay for it myself, I will. I said, but I think we need to get our parish involved in helping people in the community. That's what we are called as a Catholic Christian community to do. Well, they finally approved it, but we were doing it out of the Unitarian Church because they already had a kitchen that was certified for service to the public.

Even though the parish always had activities, our project was not a priority for the parish. So, we did our hunger program outside of the parish, even though we were a parish activity. And this has been going on for over a year. People depended on it the last Saturday of every month. That's when their monthly income is no longer available. We're running this program and we have a good group of people helping out.

One day we received a letter, and everybody that was in some kind of ministry at the church was called to a mandatory meeting, and it was on a certain date. And I said, that's got to be a mistake, because that's the night of the brown bag dinner. And so, I called the deacon, and he goes, no, that's the right night. And I said, that's the night of our Brown Bag Dinner. The deacon suggested we cancel it. I said, we've been running this program for the last year and a half. People



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count on that dinner on the last Saturday of every month. He goes, well, if you had a snowstorm, you would have canceled it. And I go, in fact, no, every snow blizzardly. I was down there shoveling the stairs so people could come in and eat. They said people were lined up. I said, we have never canceled that. I can't cancel this dinner for this mandatory meeting.

A second meeting was supposed to be some kind of directed retreat, but an educational kind of thing. A sister was running this retreat. I was quite surprised to find the sister, who was running the retreat talked about how the world was going to hell in a hen basket because Ireland now allowed abortions. She was lambasting the Muslims and other groups of people. And I saw her at Mass do this. And I was so upset.

There were two teenage girls who wore very casual clothing to mass. This sister brought this up at this meeting. They were with their parents. And so, after Mass, this nun walked up to them and said, "you two are very beautiful girls, but maybe you shouldn't show so much of your beauty in Church. You should think about what you wear to church." She embarrassed them. She embarrassed their parents. And so, she relays the story in Church. Am I the only one sitting in this meeting thinking, how horrible is this? Why are we not saying, welcome back to the Church instead of, oh, you got to dress a certain way to get in here. And after that, I decided that I was leaving that parish. I said, I can't be in this parish.

I left and I told the priest why. So, I went, and I said, because of what I see and what I don't see and because of what I hear and what I don't hear, I've decided that I need to change parishes. I'm still Catholic, but I need to change parishes. He goes, okay, thank you for what you've done. He did not ask me another question as if he really did not care I was there or not. This is sounding judgmental and blaming, and I don't mean to, but I really feel that all of this had a strong, strong influence on my kids, who do not go to church anymore.

So, what would be my message to church leadership for the synodal process? Practice what we preach. Welcome people and don't turn your back on them because they look different, or they act different. And if someone says to you, I need, and you personally can't do it, help them find someone that can help them meet those needs. I think that's the message Christ gave us. I am a very committed Catholic but felt my parish failed me and my community and they gave me the impression that it really did not matter if I was part of the parish or not.

Disaffiliation Narrative of Bart

Bart accounts for his Catholic upbringing and how that led him to question the moral choices by Catholics and the seeming hypocrisy of the church in certain matters. That led him on an agnostic journey, back to religion with the Unitarian Universalist Church, and finally with his Jewish wife and family, a conversion to reformed Judaism where their family remains active.

I grew up in Needham, Massachusetts. I went to St. Joseph's Catholic Church, and I attended St. Joseph's School from kindergarten through 8th grade. I then went to Xaverian Brothers in Westwood. Again, Catholic education all the way through high school, and that was intentional by my parents. For college I went to Stonehill College which is a Catholic College. I received a scholarship to go there, which is either Franciscan or a Dominican school. It is religious,



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but it's not overtly religious. And again, I didn't go there for the religious aspect. That was not an interest to me at that time.

Religion became a problem for me. I really listened and tried to absorb everything that was being taught in the church. But, as a child into my teen years it seemed Catholics in my life were not practicing what I thought I learned. That was the beginning of the end. And I don't want to make decisions lightly about things, like this church is boring and so on. I have to wear a tie to Church and get up early on Sundays. Yes. I didn't like doing that. But when I reached my young teen years, I started to put that superficial stuff aside and started really about this. I wanted to really look at all the things that I learned about Jesus and then compare that to what's going on with the Church. Where were my role models in faith?

I could have perhaps sought out different parishes, but at that time in my life, it did not occur to me. I remember later thinking that I was good through Confirmation, and I really tried to stay with the church. But by my high school years, I decided like I did not want to stay with the church anymore, feeling increasingly conflicted. I remembered later, was eighteen perhaps being in the car with my dad and a family friend of ours. We drove through the center of town and there was a political rally going on. The candidate was a lesbian or Communist and I'm in the back seat. The two adults are in the front talking.

They are complaining about this candidate's lifestyle. I got upset and started feeding back the stories of Jesus I heard, like connecting with prostitutes. It wasn't just some nice story. He was friends with them. It doesn't mean you have to have them over to your house and marry your son. But I basically said, why are you guys doing this? She's a human being. You guys are just *trash talking* about her. Are you serious?

So, instead of real solidarity with people, the broad sense that I got from being in Catholic school and going to Church was you don't ask questions about topics like homosexuality. Just believe what the church says about it. Stop asking questions and stick to the rules. I never got the impression that the church was interested in my doubts and questions. If you love something enough, you should be able to criticize it constructively. In my late teens and through a lot of my 20s where I didn't want to believe in God at all. I was angry at probably all religion in general, including Judaism and everything else. Religion can cause really horrible stuff in the world. Wars and people killing each other and families not talking to each other. There was a good ten years where I was just angry about religion in overall.

I married and we had kids when I was thirty. We began realizing that we wanted to do something with religion. I was still angry and did not want to believe in God at all. My wife, who is Jewish, was not sure she wanted to practice Judaism for various reasons because of her background. So, we went to a Unitarian Universalist Church for a little while before we moved to Holliston. It was there that I saw that I could have some sort of religion, and it was not necessary to believe in God in the traditional sense. You can just take it as it is, like for example, the use of rituals. And they had a framework where you could do that. They didn't have Jesus on the wall. They talked about him, but he wasn't on the wall. You cannot believe in God and still show up.



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One day there was a confirmation ceremony or some sort of coming-of-age ceremony that they did at the weekly service. Someone in their teens, a girl who's in her teens. She had a Led Zeppelin (rock and roll shirt) on. She gave a speech about what is religion for her and what God means. It was a kind of confirmation I wish I had where I could just give my heart in an open and honest way. I cried. That experience opened me up again to the power and practice of religion, but we did not remain at that church.

Finally, we ended up in reformed Judaism, which is a great spot. Maybe there are other religions, too, but it's great because you cannot believe in God and still attend. You can stay with your struggles and doubts. I know people at our temple who do not believe in God at all, and they go all the time because it's a cultural, historical, really important ritual to do. The other aspect is when you start having kids, I considered death. My wife's mother died. Well, not right when we had kids, but whatever. She was one of the first of our loved ones who passed away. Having traditions and rituals in church that help with these key moments in life are reassuring. They are ancient, and they're really useful and knowing they are honed over thousands of years becomes comforting.

Disaffiliation Narrative of Cristina

Cristina quipped in the beginning of the interview: "Are you sure the Cardinals and Pope Francis want to hear from the disappeared from the church?" Cristina's story begins with a strong Catholic family that led to serious questions about the role of women in the church, the trust factor in the clergy abuse scandals, and her own experience of abuse.

This interview is important to me, especially knowing with your assurance that it'll go to Church leaders. I think I can benefit from it. And I think church leadership can benefit. I'll give you a thumbnail biography. I was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. And my wonderful parents, although we butted heads quite a bit too, and God rest their souls, are gone now. I miss them every day. But they were devout Catholics. And I say that from where I am now, looking back, you know, as a child. The way I was raised Catholic was just my normal. What I did not understand, is that they were very progressive. I didn't understand that until I went to college, exposed to the larger world. So, I went to Catholic school for eight years. My brothers went for eight years. And then the last three were pulled out of Catholic school by my father because of a specific teacher. He was a John Bircher and was preaching the gospel of *John Birch* in the classroom. I feel like my younger siblings missed out on a lot of Catholic formation.

When I was 15 and had just started dating. I was raped. So, during my late middle school, early high school years, the years leading up to when I was raped. There was no way on earth I could confide in my parents. One, they'll blame me. Two, daddy will kill the guy. I mean, there was no doubt in my mind, and there's still not much doubt in my mind. And then he'd go to prison, and it would be all my fault, as young people do. Or maybe all human beings do. I concocted all these scenarios in my head and thank God afterward when I found I was not pregnant afterall. I buried that for a long time once I found out that I was not pregnant, but it impacted my life, my dating life, whatever. I was very angry. I didn't know that, and I felt very guilty. I didn't really process that until much later. I think they're important pieces of my story.



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Eventually, I met a young man who was Catholic. His parents and my parents knew each other through the Catholic Church, also through legal circles. Both my husband's dad and my dad were lawyers. They were both involved in pro-life work. We met and married and moved to Boston, actually moved to Cambridge. He was in the architecture school at Harvard University. I went to Leslie College, now Leslie University, and got my master's in education as a reading specialist. And we moved back to Atlanta because we had family there and we wanted to have children. It changed my life in wonderful and amazing ways. We were involved in our parish, which was the Cathedral Community in Atlanta. I've always been involved in education peripherally, and then after I was trained, so we volunteered to lead an adult Ed program, brought in speakers.

However, about six weeks after we married, I had a rude awakening. My husband was a racist which conflicted greatly with my faith. But I knew I was in this relationship for the long haul. So, I tried to make the most of it for 26 years. We did a good job parenting, but we grew further apart, and we had less interests in common and that he had it at the time when we married. But he developed a drinking problem. And he was very abusive. I asked him to get help. I went into counseling and was in counseling for about 19 years. He would come in and out of the counseling, but it didn't really make an impact on him. And I became terribly depressed. And I thought about staying with him, but I didn't see how I could. I felt like I was dying. The idea of divorce was not even floating in my mind until a few years before we did actually divorce.

I've struggled since I was probably a teenager in awakening to my own spirituality and better understanding or processing who and what the Church was in my life. I've always struggled with the way women were treated. And the breaking point for me was when I had a daughter, and I couldn't raise her under those terms. I wanted her to know her own goodness, her own strengths. I wanted her to be empowered. I wanted her to have the opportunity to give back. I didn't want a corporate entity to push her down. My experience of women's treatment in the Church is we've been dismissed, demeaned, mistreated, discounted, patronized, and blamed throughout history. This is not just my experience. This is 2000 years. And it's been very interesting this past year, studying Church history. Women cannot become priests or deacons, and there's very little opportunity for leadership in the Church hierarchy. And I've known some very wise women in my time, but they had no voice. I think if my mother had been born in a different time in situation, she might have become a priest.

Both my parents suffered from dementia. Mama had Alzheimer's; Daddy had vascular dementia. And in her final years by then, I finally cut ties with the Church, and she was in a nursing home. She wanted to live with me, and I would have done that if I didn't have to work, but I didn't have that option. But she wanted to go to Church every Sunday, and she still had that desire. And I could not bring myself to go to a Catholic Church. So, I took her to the Episcopal Church that I had been visiting and found very welcoming. And I'll never forget that Sunday we were there, there was a woman priest celebrating, and she also gave the homily. And my mother kept elbowing me and saying, "Isn't it wonderful how they allow women priests? Now she's preaching, isn't this wonderful?" I think God forgives me. I did not have the heart to tell her, oh, no, this is not a Catholic Church. I said, yes, it is wonderful. She was so happy about that.



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Another thing that I've really struggled with in my own soul and talking with my family and friends is the clergy sex abuse thing. The initial refusal by the church to even acknowledge it, to deal with it in any way was appalling. Ongoing rage, misplaced, guilt, shame, and consequent distrust, I think has some causative action and why a lot of people left the Church. I don't think it had to be that way. I think if the wisdom of women had been consulted, it might have been different, but I just don't think it had to be that way. These were criminals. They needed to be prosecuted, not moved around from one diocese to another or within a Diocese. When I was growing up, we had a priest who sexually abused young boys. When enough parishioners went to the bishop, the bishop moved him to another parish, usually a mission Parish up in the North Georgia mountains. And he did that until he died.

Again, very young. I was in the Catholic Youth Organization at church, which was after a Sunday evening Mass. One of the priests was our sponsor. I had to go outside the church basement and wait in the parking lot for my dad to pick me up. And this priest walked out there with me. He didn't want me walking out in the dark alone. Well, while we're waiting for my dad to drive up, pick me up and take me home, this priest put his arm around me and stuck his tongue down my throat. One, I had no idea what was going on. The idea of a priest behaving that way was totally foreign. It didn't compute. And again, I wondered what in the world, what did I do. Well, down the road he eventually left the priesthood. But my abuse was never addressed that I know of.

I'm immersed in the Episcopalian community now. I haven't formally joined the Church. I tried to two times, went through their study classes. The first time, the bishop got sick and canceled when he was going to come and welcome a group of class of us into the church. The second time, something came up and he canceled again. So that was two strikes. And I thought, oh, maybe the Holy Spirit is trying to tell me something. Anyway, so I have not officially joined, and I'm not sure I want to. I feel like I'm kind of in a discernment period. I left because I was shriveling up like a raisin. I was dying inside. I needed to take care of myself. And I had good friends who urged me to stay and work from within. But I was dying. I was terrified. I was losing my soul. In my mind, spirituality is very important to me, and I've never stopped reading, praying, trying to take care of my spiritual growth and development. I made a list of the people that I read and kinds of ways that I try to put my faith into action because I don't want to leave the impression that I left the Church and left a faith journey left. That faith journey I am still taking.

Disaffiliation Narrative of Alex

Alex, brought up in the faith and very active in her parish with her husband, found difficulty in the church with the outbreak of the clergy sexual abuse scandals. Her efforts to engage the pastor in these issues were frustrated, leading her to seek a church elsewhere.

The term "cradle Catholic" describes my life in the past. We were at a local parish, and my husband was leading the RCIA. We conducted Cursillo retreats with the Holy Cross Fathers, which were wonderful, and I don't know the year, but the year of the clergy sex abuse scandal just changed everything for me. So, my husband and I left the church. We had two kids. Our son was in fourth grade and our daughter was in first grade. And boy, that was really hard. And I was very angry. A lot has happened since then. But back in the beginning, there was a lot of denial from the



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pulpit about it. The pastor, who was beloved and had been there a long time, had a pretty rough edge, and I asked to meet with him and associate pastor.

They're talking about the scandal on all the sports fields and in all the kids' activities and all the women's groups, but not in Church. They were not talking about it in the church. The pastor was pretty rude to me. And so, we finally had a listening session in the parish. I was just so angry and also just really perplexed at my peers, who I felt like had blinders on to what was happening. It was brand new and lots of information was not given. It was a really hard move for me when we left the church. I'm a Catholic. I still consider myself Catholic. And to take my kids out of catechism. My neighbor was the Lutheran pastor for many years, and he was my neighbor. At that time, I switched to the Lutheran Church for a while. And I'm not in the Lutheran Church anymore. Presently, I'm in a non-denominational Church. I literally lost trust in the entire Catholic Church.

It was very painful. And I felt like there was no support in the Church and that people closed their eyes, and they close their ears, and they were just misled. They said it was a very small problem, and it wasn't. It was a very large systemic problem. And I love the Catholic faith. I love the sacraments. I love the liturgy. I'm away from the liturgy now in a non-denominational Church, but I still love it. I'll probably go to Holy Thursday service next week. I stay connected through the Holy Cross Retreat House and My Brother's Keeper program. My family is still all Catholic. And when I come back to Boston, I try to go to church, bring my father to church. But personally, I've very much deepened my faith outside the Catholic Church. Leaving the Catholic Church allowed me to experience Church in a different way. And so, I've come to really know and love scripture and really good teaching. So, less liturgy and more as a richer faith for me, I have a more profound love for Jesus, and I'm grateful.

Another element for me was just my anger with the bishops. The Boston Globe newspaper would show that there was a conference of the bishops making decisions regarding the aftermath of the scandals. The newspaper showed a picture hundreds of men in this conference and I was thinking, "you're all accountable, you all let this happen." And this is a sexist remark, but I said it wouldn't have happened if the nuns were there. The nuns look out for the children. They have some hard broken parts like all of us, but I just had a real disdain for those who knew and let it go. I want to say one other thing, too, because I got out of the Catholic culture. I didn't know that people outside of Catholicism passed a lot of judgment on Catholics. I was Catholic, and I was part of that world. But now that I'm in a non-denominational Church and in Bible study I find that people are pretty critical of the Catholics outside the church, which I didn't know. And I do a little education by providing information about the Catholic Church they may not know. I do love many parts of the Catholic faith.

Before I left the church, there was a priest in the Cursillo Retreats who gave a talk on one of those weekends. He apologized for any harm to any person by anyone in the church, whether it be priest, nun, or lay person. That was powerful because many people have been hurt, and not just with sexual abuse. I have to be clear that I'm not a victim of sexual abuse. I had a difficult priest in my Catholic Parish growing up, but I was a teenager trying to figure out things in the Church. I felt as though Satan entered the hearts of men who had professed to do the work of Jesus, do the work of God. He got in there and clearly wreaked havoc, that's for sure. How survivors of abuse reconcile with that, I have no idea.



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Disaffiliation Narrative of Tony

Tony's story speaks of his ambivalent relationship with the church. Growing up Catholic he had many unanswered questions about how the church comes across publicly, and the contrast to what they say in churches. He found an important connection to contemplative prayer as an Oblate of the Benedictines, but does not find parish life compelling.

It is always concerning to me how people within the parish, with my experience, seem so unchristian. And I know we all have our views, and we have our biases, which I think is a lot based on our upbringing and our perhaps struggle with faith. It is always a challenge but that's what turned me off to church or disaffiliated myself. I see is a lack of compassion and empathy and maybe trying to stick too hard to tradition. I see how views and the opinions are expressed in the media, and unfortunately, sometimes by Church leadership and it's disenchanting and disheartening. But again, I think about what balance they're trying to achieve. I think about, wow, why aren't those people just being a little bit more compassionate and open? Because maybe, I don't know, maybe God is trying to tell us something by offering us to look at persons who are thought to be outsiders. Maybe they're not an outsider merely because the tradition says they are an outsider. (Referring to LGBTQ Catholics). What turns me off is sort of like the more angry, conservative moral outrage of today's culture. And it's like, well, I don't really share that belief.

As I grow older, church practice became less of a priority. But at the same time, I was also coming across other Catholic writings that I wasn't aware of growing up, because you don't teach that in the religious instruction. You're not exposing kids to Thomas Merton or any of the writings of the Saints or anything like that or any real spirituality when you're at that point in life. So, I discovered afterwards these prayer resources. But then I've always flirted with contemplative writings. After my first son was born back in 2010, I started going to St. Mary's in Newark, where the monks are, and became an Oblate. I started practicing prayer with them and learning from them. I haven't gone there in a while. But when you ask about my last experience with the Church, I am able to say that gives me some kind of connection, as opposed to the weekly interactions of my local parish, which it's a very large p"arish. I would still consider myself Catholic, although loosely connected through Benedictine spirituality.

I still believe that despite not being committed to sacramental practice, I did receive a faith grounding. In fact, that I've been through so much, I've seen so much change in the culture, I find myself responding to that by saying, yeah, but it is worth something. And even if you may not have the belief or the faith in the institutional church, there's still something important, there's still an ethical grounding, there's still something moral about it that's important, regardless of what your belief is. So, it's worth something to explore.

You know, there are times where I definitely felt a sense of belonging, especially with the monks and with the other Oblates as we got together after the talks. But it's sort of an ebb and flow thing. There are times where I desire to be part of it. But then there are times when I don't really feel the need for it. And I don't know if that's because of my other responsibilities or other obligations, or I just don't feel the need for it. I don't know. And I feel like maybe that's part of my personality.



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Disaffiliation Narrative of Sue and Bob (husband and wife)

Sue and Bob spoke of their own departure from the Catholic Church to attend the First Congregational Church (United Church of Christ). They also mention the disaffiliation of their son.

One of the things that impacts me personally is because I started out as a child as a Methodist, and it was from a very early age and intimate experience of Sunday school and teaching outside of sitting in the sanctuary. As a child, you get a lot of early training about Jesus in the life of Jesus and all the Golden Rule and all the good lessons, how to be kind to one another. I have three other siblings. None of the other three have any continued lived religious affiliation beyond their own confirmation. And my younger sister was never even confirmed because she was off living in Brazil at the time. And my parents weren't active at that time. So, I'm the one my mom always said, she's my religious one. I don't know how that happened, but just by the sheer presence of going to Church all the time early on. And then I had a friend who was a Quaker. I went to her Church and had that experience as well. I met Bob, my husband, and we attended the Catholic Church.

But when you talk about some of the dissension that people were feeling in the Catholic pews, you could see those who were very strict theologically. His own mother was not happy about Vatican II. She liked the personal, and "just me and God relationship." She didn't want to turn and shake hands with anybody. I observed this, and I absorbed it. For me, I always appreciated the strength of community. And so that's what we felt very much at our Catholic parish back in Ohio, how much the experience of community meant and how we cared and supported each other. And the more ministry you were directly involved in, the more you were fed by what you were putting out there and helping people. I got that same warm, welcoming feeling here at the First Congregational Church where we now attend. I did not get that in St. Mary's Catholic Church as much. When we moved to Holliston, we tried the local Catholic Church but found it very different from our Catholic experience in Ohio. The Holliston parish was too conservative for us.

The farther the generations get, the more distant from a lived faith I witness. I would love to see our granddaughter get baptized somewhere, anywhere. But I just pretty sure that's not going to happen because between the two of them (disaffiliated son and wife), our daughter in law is half Jewish, maybe half Episcopalian. I'm not sure. And our son, who grew up Catholic, they're wonderful people, and they're very moral people, but they don't see having a life within a structured faith community as being any benefit to them. Their support structure is really based on their friendships, people they went to school with. It's a disappointment, but I just see it as the fact of life. That's the way in America and across faiths. It's not just the Catholic Church,

We had the option of taking our son from public school and sending him to the local Catholic school, but we did not do it. He had marvelous youth group and exposure at Church with other adults who were teaching him catechism. The middle school we sent him was a secular (public) school, but they had Chapel (religious services), and it was a widely diverse school. It was an opportunity for our son to go to school with Blacks and Indians and Asians, and they'd have Chapel (religious services) and from each of those different religious experiences. All of the students were required to lead Chapel. I remember one time I attended Chapel and this beautiful



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prayer was presented and I thought, wow, this is why we're here. It was not just one faith. It's a collective world mindset about faith and that there is one God. And even though we have different roads to get to that one God, it's very right to be exposed to all of that. And they would take turns speaking on a subject, not necessarily a moral subject. They might speak about a trip they went on or whatever, but just the exposure to that wider experience was fantastic.

In the First Congregational Church we now attend, the pastor is the best homilist that we heard. I'm an introvert, so worrying about community is unusual. But I like the community quite a bit. People are very open, and it's amazing to me that even though we are very conservative, we can fit in with very liberal people there without a problem at all. It's like it doesn't matter at all. The first time we went over there, we had the sign of peace at the beginning of the service. They call it a welcoming, but they literally get up out of their pews and would walk all around the Church to say hello to people and greet each other and give peace. We would always say peace be with you because that's what we were used to saying. That blew my mind. I mean, this is like five minutes of wandering around the Church just greeting each other. The sense of community was ritualized in a very concrete and beautiful manner.

Another thing that attracted us to the Protestant community was that they had a nursery for your baby. In the Catholic Church we went to mass holding our son. We're in the Church, the usher came down and invited us to get out of our seats and go stand by in what we call the narthex. We sat in the vestment closet, and we were not pleased. It felt like they don't welcome children in the sanctuary. That particular priest didn't like having small children in the pews. He could not stand a crying baby during mass. And so, we felt we were not welcome with our child. It's a shame. That was a pretty strong issue. We were looking for other churches at that time.

Finally, I had an experience in my prayer group back in Ohio before we moved to Holliston, Massachusetts. One of my friends in the prayer group shared that her daughter was abused by a priest. And I didn't know it early on, but she finally shared it with the group one day. And I was shocked to hear the pedophilia issue was present in our diocesan area, I think it was known, but it didn't really become big for me until it became a big issue in Boston. People started talking about more about other sons and daughters. I was totally unaware of any of that going on. I tended to idolize the priests. So, I know firsthand from her experience, which she shared about her daughter. The damage to her daughter impelled her to leave the Church and she never went back. All of these things precipitated us to look elsewhere for our religious home once we moved to Massachusetts.

Some Pastoral Considerations

Each of the disaffiliation narratives share a number of characteristics as well as important differences. All of those we interviewed for this report were formed in the Catholic faith from a young age. There were different levels of commitment to their parishes in their adulthood, but some negative experiences precipitated the decision for disaffiliation. These negative experiences varied of course from relationships with the pastor to church standing on social issues that was expressed in the local parish in particular ways. Also common was a love for their Catholic faith and how, despite leaving the practice of sacramental life, elements of that faith remain with them.



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With this comparison in mind, I wish to briefly outline three overarching themes in these and other stories of departure from the church that may help us as church leaders frame our understanding of these stories that may elicit pastoral responses to the deep faith and spiritual longings these stories reveal. These themes include: (a) disaffiliated stories as sacred stories, (b) the common ground of many disaffiliated Catholics with Catholic theology, and (c) the understanding of the faith community with both dwellers and seekers.

Disaffiliated Stories are Sacred Stories

The listening opportunities in this report lead us to realize the sacredness and meaning of disaffiliated stories we engage with, as well as the ecclesial experiences that shaped their lives are complex. Their meanings need to be discerned together. We hear stories of search and hope, of frustration and crisis in the search for belonging, believing and values that undergird the moral life. Instead of merely a “failure” of one’s faith by exiting the church, dialogue unveils the experience of disaffiliation as “one of the most theologically significant phenomena in contemporary Catholic life.”⁸ Stories of disaffiliation are holy journeys because they reveal deep spiritual and social longings, unresolved wounds in the church, family, and society. Thus, our starting point is not a concern for a loss of membership of our religious institutions, but instead our main jumping off point must a strident pursuit to understand the sacred and spiritual impulse in their lives.⁹

It is often that people of all ages wrestle with what it means to be Catholic in prominent ways, so that everyday Catholic life contains an ambiguous everyday theological play between normative practice and non-normative belief and practice. This can be true for parents, as well as children. The theological space to speak openly and frankly about ordinary belief and practice, and the doubts that accompany them is always there. Whether it meets official expectations or not, it is this space where Catholic ideals and Catholic realities blend in convergence and divergence, and where the *whole* of Catholic identity may be more fully understood.¹⁰

Perhaps for this reason, Catholics in general do not merely absorb ideas from pulpits and religious education classes. They negotiate with them. In this sense, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says truly little about what Catholics know or think about their faith, nor how it is experienced in the family.¹¹ Catholics exercise “interpretive authority” when engaging their tradition and “lived religion” means a process which is never disconnected from the flow of people’s everyday lives. Some religious meanings that are available to them in spiritual understanding, values and religious practices may be evocative and others may be deemed less so.

⁸ J. Patrick Hornbeck II, “Deconversion from Roman Catholicism: Mapping a Fertile Field.” *American Catholic Studies*, Vol. 122, No. 2 (2011), 1.

⁹ Maura Thompson Hagarty, PhD and Ellen B. Koneck, MAR. *Beyond Disaffiliation: A Process of Hope-Filled Action*. (St. Mary’s Press, Christian Brothers Publication: Winona, Minnesota, 2019), 49.

¹⁰ Tom Beaudoin and J. Patrick Hornbeck II. “Deconversion and Ordinary Theology: A Catholic Study.” Chapter Four. In *Exploring Ordinary Theology : Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*. Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2013. ProQuest eBook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/fordham-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1114098>. Created from Fordham eBooks on 2018-07-03 13:54:17, 34.

¹¹ Jerome P. Baggett. *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith*. Kindle Edition, 553-554.



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Common Ground of Disaffiliated Catholics and Catholic Theology

In any dialogue, one of the first considerations is seeking common ground. The Practical Theologian, Terry Veling offers some examples of the practice of disaffiliated Catholics and Catholic theological tradition that are important starting points in affiliated and disaffiliated engagement:

a) a deep appreciation and respect for human cultures, with a constant need of dialogue among us.

b) a deep appreciation of Catholic social teaching, stressing the dignity of the human person and the inextricable tie between love of God and love of neighbor.

c) appreciation of God's presence in the ordinariness of life which our rich sacramental tradition expresses.

d) an appreciation of a prophetic imagination which is particularly developed in liberation and political theology.

e) an appreciation and respect for faith working together with reason, and for faith working with good works.

f) an appreciation of scriptures and what they mean for our times, and finally:

g) a commitment to seeking and encouraging the good in all things, especially with the most disenfranchised.

When people depart from church practice, they often take core elements, like Veling's list, of their Catholic faith with them. This too is reflected in various degrees in the conversations of this report.¹² As indicated in the conversations in this report, three points need to be considered: people leave church practice but not faith in God for many different reasons; in their departure they take elements of their Catholic faith with them; and they attempt to live their faith lives in other religious institutions or informal spaces with their Catholic faith and perhaps other significant influences together. Thus, elements of Catholic faith, even though lived outside the church, are enculturated in many ways into the larger secular ambient beyond the institutional church.

Dwellers and Seekers are One Faith Community

The perceived disjunction may be between "seekers" – "who wish to realize in their life new, more personally authentic, ways of being Christian and Catholic within and outside of the Church – and "dwellers" – "who feel that in the Church all is already clear, well defined, and simply to be followed attentively."¹³ It is this perceived disconnection that lies at the heart of the failures and challenges of pastoral outreach. But in reality, the ecclesial community is not merely those who come to the sacraments and gather in community in the church, whether weekly,

¹² Terry A. Veling, *Catholic Practical Theology: Reflections on an Emerging Field. Compass: A Review of Topical Theology*, 45(2), 2011, pp. 38 - 39.

¹³ George F. McLean, "Introduction: Disjunctions in the 21st Century," *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, Christian Philosophical Studies I, eds. Charles Taylor, José Casanova and George F. McLean (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy), 2012, p. 1.



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monthly, or otherwise. God's salvific, sacramental action comes from the church and transcends it, and indeed institutional religiosity itself. In Christ, there is no disjunction between the sacred and secular.¹⁴

In the background to this understanding is the notion that secularization, often seen as an impediment to faith, is not a process of subtraction indicated by progressive abandonment of religiosity. Instead, the process of secularization is integral to the major search for human self-fulfillment, and is pursued by many, including those in this report, whose experience in the Church were negative or difficult to one degree or another, or trust in the institution of the Church is wanting. This has led to the Catholic attitude that those subtractions are the problem of others who have not listened to the Church. Instead, there is a legitimate dialogue between fulfillment in Christ in the Church, and how Christ is present outside church structures and institutional expectations, between the sacred and secular, dwellers, and seekers.¹⁵

In this sense, dwellers and seekers are in a healthy tension (Institution vs. Individual) that requires the mediation of dialogue. In the Church's understanding of dialogue, both have much to learn and teach each other. The pastoral characteristic unfortunately conveys more an adversarial relationship. How can the Church forge new directions in language, doctrinal thinking, and institutional practices that find greater resonance with the lived experiences of increasingly secularized Catholics and others?¹⁶ At the same time, how can the Church share the rich tradition of the Church with the disaffiliated that answers their deepest spiritual longings in a secular age. For example, contemplative prayer, the mystical tradition, and Catholic social teaching are areas that not only the disaffiliated take with them in their departure experiences but share with others. In this sense, dwellers and seekers need and complete each other. Postsecular Catholicism is thus a continual dialogue of church tradition and secular realities, dwellers and seekers in one faith community.¹⁷

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¹⁴ In Mclean's article (p.1) he shares that Charles Taylor depicts this disjunction in these ways: 1/ the "seekers" who wish to realize in their life new, more personally authentic, ways of being Christian and Catholic vs "the dwellers" who feel that in the Church all is already clear, well defined and simply to be followed assiduously; 2/ those who bring a modern sense of personal responsibility to Church teaching in search of critical convergence vs the Church as a jurisdictional authority to which is due obedience; 3/ ethical and moral praxis understood as a human, fallible and historical or existential achievement vs a natural law morality built on abstract, unchanging and universal essences; and 4/ a spirituality open to enrichment by the experiences and spiritualities of the many great religious cultures and civilizations, even the nonreligious, vs a stress on the completeness of the Christian spiritual tradition focused on the Second Person of the Trinity.

¹⁵ Ibid, 2.

¹⁶ Michele Dillon. *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2 (Kindle Edition)

¹⁷ Ibid, 157 (Kindle Edition)