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Towards a better understanding of issues and pastoral insights on the Catholic disaffiliation

SUMMARY. The main issue raised in this article is the significant decline in the number of practising Catholics in the Western world, including United Kingdom. For example, statistical data indicates that only 13% of cradle Catholics in Britain say they attend Mass weekly. Of those raised Catholic, 37% say they have “no religion”. Several extensive quantitative and qualitative research projects were initiated in the UK in the last few decades, and by supporting many of these projects with young adults and adults, the Catholic Church in England attempted to understand the extent of the issues and how they can be addressed. Respondents indicated multiple reasons for their disaffiliation, such as personal issues, changes in individual circumstances and world views, and painful lived experiences in the Church. Several respondents revealed that they consider themselves Catholics and actively involved in the Church life. However, they do not attend Church on Sundays regularly nor pray. The article presents some insights of the well-known Catholic theologians on the issues of disaffiliation in the context of the Vatican II implementation and missed opportunities by the Church to communicate moral teaching. It suggests to follow Pope Francis’ encouragement to experiment in our pastoral endeavours and Mallon’s “unconditional love” approach.

KEYWORDS: disaffiliation, religious identities, Mass attendance, pastoral approach.

Introduction

Current sociological research on the state of religious beliefs in Western societies, particularly in Western Europe, including England, indicates a steep decline in religious practices, belonging and even interest in the Christian religion. Statistical data indicates that only 15% of cradle Catholics in America say they attend Mass weekly, and in Britain, an even smaller percentage (13%) still attend it weekly. Of those raised

Catholic, 37% say they have “no religion”. Other Christian denominations suffer similar “haemorrhage” of their memberships¹.

In the last few decades, several extensive research projects were initiated in the UK to try to understand the level of decline in religious practices² and reasons for the decline³. Some studies attempted to create personal profiles of young people to help religious educators understand the current religious stance of youth who still consider themselves Catholics and do not necessarily attend Catholic services regularly⁴. Much energy was dedicated to understanding contemporary young Catholic people⁵. Every person has a unique history, and the reasons behind their disaffiliation vary significantly.

Pope Francis challenges religious educators and pastoral ministers to look at some creative and innovative ways and approaches of reaching out to people who lost their connection with Catholic tradition and possibly have never received it from their parents⁶.

The aim is to provide an overview of major studies on disaffiliation in England. It will not focus on other European countries where the religious landscape is diverse, although the significant tendencies are moving in the same direction. Reasons for

¹ Stephen Bullivant, *Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America* (New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2022).

² James Hanvey, *On the Way to Life: Contemporary Culture and Theological Development as a Framework for Catholic Education, Catechesis and Formation. A Study by The Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life* (London, England: The Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life, 2005), <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/11/on-the-way-to-life-2005.pdf>; Ann Cason, *Challenges and Opportunities for the New Evangelisation: A Case Study of Catholic Primary School Parents in England and Wales* (London, England: Commissioned by the Department for Evangelisation and Catechesis, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2014), <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/a-case-study-of-catholic-primary-school-parents-in-england-and-wales/>; Danny Curtin and Stephen Davies, *Complex Catholicism. Discovering the Reality of Young Catholics. A Detailed Typology*, a Research Project in a Partnership between CYMFed and Camino House (CYMFED and Camino House, 2018); Stephen Sebastian Bullivant, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II*, first edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Stephen Sebastian Bullivant et al., *Why Catholics Leave, What They Miss, and How They Might Return* (New York: Paulist Press, 2019).

³ David Hay and Kate Hunt, *Understanding the Spirituality of People Who Don't Go to Church. A Report on the Findings of the Adults' Spirituality Project at the University of Nottingham* (Nottingham: Mission Theological Advisory Group in cooperation with Centre for the Study of Human Relations, University of Nottingham, 2000), https://www.spiritualjourneys.org.uk/pdf/look_understanding_the_spirituality_of_people.pdf.

⁴ Curtin and Davies, “Complex Catholicism”.

⁵ Ann Cason, “Challenges and Opportunities for the New Evangelisation: A Case Study of Catholic Primary School Parents in England and Wales”, *Bishops Conference of England and Wales*, 2014, <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/a-case-study-of-catholic-primary-school-parents-in-england-and-wales/>; Karren North, *Research among Catholic Young Adults in England and Wales: How to Disrupt the “Limbo of Non-Belonging”* (London, England: The Aquinas Centre for Theological Literacy, St Mary's University, 2018), <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/aquinas/docs/2018-apr-limbo-of-non-belonging.pdf>.

⁶ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: To the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful, on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2013), §133.

disaffiliation might vary depending on countries' historical and socio-cultural contexts. For example, to provide a meaningful comparison of contrasting countries such as the Netherlands or Belgium with the Republic of Ireland, Poland, or Lithuania would require a more extensive analysis of historical socio-cultural research. For the same reason, other English-speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, and African and Asian countries are not included in this review.

Over the years, people who stopped attending Church were assigned different labels. Some call them “disaffiliates”⁷ some identify them as people who reached “point zero”⁸, and some call them “non-religion” or “nones”⁹. Authors agree that assigning any labels and characterising the “nones” or “point zero” is not straightforward and that their world views and value attitudes are not straightforwardly secular. Some authors say that “no religion” has become the new cultural norm. Many countries, including England, can be described as “between Christian and no religion”; they have “ceased to be a Christian country”¹⁰.

Secularisation theses and “multilingual” modernity

While extensive Europe-wide surveys are informative and might provide some information on the general trends when it comes to the religiosity of the population, the questions asked them in, for example, the European Value Surveys¹¹, are too general and therefore are difficult to interpret from a theological point of view. Many theoretical studies related to large populations leaving the Church, have come to the conclusion that this is a “subjective turn” regarding religion and spirituality. Many religious, including Catholic, writers quote the “secularisation theses” is one way when trying to understand the place of religion within modernity¹². Charles Taylor¹³ is cited extensively as the author who provided the “most sustained” exploration of the development of the culture of “inwardness”¹⁴.

An interesting observation about this “inwardness” and “turn” is explored by Hanvey¹⁵. Due to this new epistemological shift, a new “religious subject” is emerging

⁷ Bullivant et al., *Why Catholics Leave*.

⁸ Herman Lombaerts and Didier Pollefeyt, eds., *Hermeneutics and Religious Education*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 180 (Leuven; Dudley, MA: Uitgeveru Peeters, 2004).

⁹ Linda Woodhead, “The Rise of “no Religion” in Britain: The Emergence of a New Cultural Majority”, *Journal of the British Academy* 4 (8 December 2016), 245–261.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹¹ Pierre Brechon and Frédéric Gonthier, eds., *European Values: Trends and Divides over Thirty Years*, European Values Studies, vol. 17 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017).

¹² Hanvey, *On the Way to Life*, 6.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25–29.

¹⁵ Hanvey, *On the Way to Life*, 16.

as a “pilgrim”¹⁶. Daniele Hervieu-Leger’s¹⁷ defines “pilgrim” as the metaphor, which represents a fluidity in personal spirituality organised around an individual’s search for identity and to connect with a traditional viable personal narrative. In contrast to the “pilgrim”, the “communicant” (a pastoral worker, catechist, evangeliser) feels obliged and is regulated by obedience to institutional norms and takes a “fixed” or “stable” form. While a “pilgrim” sees religious practice as voluntary, autonomous, and not institutional, they reject institutional control over their religious life. According to Carol and Hanvey¹⁸, these metaphors “capture and explain the reconfiguration of identity around religion” in late modernity. Numerous surveys on those who left or attended the Church irregularly explore the voices of those who could be identified as “disaffiliates” and “pilgrims” in a rather limited way.

Different contexts, similar research findings

The Western countries’ cultural, historical, and socio-economical contexts, where extensive empirical research studies on disaffiliation were done, differ significantly. Therefore, the results cannot be compared like for like. However, the main questions researchers looked to answer and lenses through which researchers looked at when analysing the results are open for some comparative analysis and can provide information about the identity of the respondents who left the Church.

Bleak picture of disaffiliation

Statistical data indicates that about half of all baptised and raised Catholics in Britain no longer consider themselves Catholics¹⁹. Twenty per cent of cradle Catholics in Britain identify themselves as without religion. Converts to Catholicism are outnumbered by a ratio of ten to one by the number of those who left. Of those who identify themselves as Catholics, less than one in three attend church services every week. Almost a third of Catholics never attend Church²⁰. Bullivant concludes that it was evident that many people feel distant from the Church and no longer identify the Catholic tradition as their own.

¹⁶ Hanvey, *On the Way to Life*, 26.

¹⁷ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Hanvey, *On the Way to Life*, 27.

¹⁹ Brechon and Gonthier, *European Values*.

²⁰ Stephen Bullivant, “Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales: A Statistical Report Based on Recent British Social Attitudes Data”, Catholic Research Forum Reports 1 (Twickenham: Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, 2016).

Main tendencies

According to Bullivant many commentators identify three broad causes for disaffiliation tendencies²¹. The first one is seeing Second Vatican Council as the primary cause of the disaffiliation by placing too much emphasis on the laity's role. The second category focuses on how the conciliar "age of the laity" has been somehow thwarted, including those who blame "conservatives" who prevented far-reaching Second Vatican Council's reforms, and "the fallout" surrounding *Humanae Vitae*. The third main camp is associated with fewer internal factors of the Church and tries to look "beyond the Catholic bubble" by recognising wider social and cultural influences. This last approach believes that "due to unprecedentedly challenging socio-religious climate", the disaffiliation would have occurred despite Vatican II and not because of it²².

Religious identities

Bullivant²³ uses Jenkin's²⁴ definition of identity as "a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectives". Bullivant recognises that in many studies, Catholic disaffiliates are viewed as a specific type of religious identity, however "real-life religious identities, of all types, are rarely sharply or straightforwardly defined" and we must therefore be sensitive to "the complex and messy relationships between <...> different aspects and forms of religion which make up the "fuzzy frontiers" of religious identity"²⁵. Bullivant claims that statistical data indicates that a large proportion of self-identifying Catholics do not attend Church on any regular basis and sometimes do not even believe in God with any great conviction, let alone any more specific doctrines that appear in the Catechism²⁶. The phenomenon of disaffiliation (adoption of "no religion") is significant²⁷ and the diversity of disaffiliated people is vast and cannot be understood in isolation. They are "significant targets for further discussion and, to some degree, attempted explanation"²⁸.

²¹ Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*, 12.

²² Ibid., 15.

²³ Ibid., 19.

²⁴ Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 3rd edition, Key Ideas, vol. 10 (London: Routledge, 2008), 5.

²⁵ Stephen E. Gregg, *Engaging with Living Religion: A Guide to Fieldwork in the Study of Religion* (London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 10.

²⁶ Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*, 19.

²⁷ Ibid., 54.

²⁸ Ibid., 53.

Qualitative aspects in the UK surveys

Although in many of the available large studies with qualitative aspects many grievances towards the Church were expressed, they still do not paint a complete picture of who the respondents are, their very personal views on religion and faith, and their search for a meaningful life. However, some smaller surveys might shed more light on these aspects. The following short overview of the literature covers only a limited number of available studies. The main criteria for selecting the studies in the UK were to look for those that included some respondents' responses in their own voices.

The Portsmouth survey

A group of pastoral theologians, led by professor Bullivant with contributions from Sherry A. Wedell, who is well known for her "Forming Intentional Disciples" programme, and James Mallon, creator of the *Divine Renovation* programme, attempted to replicate Trenton's survey (the USA) in the UK²⁹. The main focus of this survey was on why about 300 respondents have stopped attending Mass (this does not preclude them having stopped believing, but the attendance at Mass was taken as a point of leaving the Church). The second probe question was to learn more about their identities.

According to Bullivant³⁰, in many ways, the Portsmouth survey results resembled Trenton and other similar research findings in the US and the UK. Portsmouth survey identified the Church's teaching on certain moral and doctrinal matters and, significantly, related to the respondent's lifestyle, such as marriage, family and sexual attitudes, which were related not to "abstract disagreements", but rather were deeply personal ones. That is when they touch on the individual circumstances of the respondents or people close to them. Many of the respondents identified one of the reasons for their disaffiliation as "their experience" of the Church, and claimed that "the Church should 'update' its teachings or their applications", that the Church "should bring its formal teachings more into line with the ethical and cultural norms prevalent in Britain today", that the Church is "behind the times", "backward", "outdated"³¹.

Many of respondents believed they were "technically" Catholic; however, they might not feel religious, or they might feel sometimes connection with the Catholic Church and see themselves as a believer sometimes, and at other times not, or they might still feel very much as adhering to the Christian values, however, without an affiliation to the Church. Bullivant concluded that the respondents testified "the very real shades of grey in real-life religious identities: that is, to the complex and messy relationships <...> which make up the 'fuzzy frontiers' of religious identity"³².

²⁹ Bullivant et al., *Why Catholics Leave*.

³⁰ Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 79.

Interestingly enough, this survey replicated results and conclusions of a project conducted back in 2002. Philip Knights and Andrea Murray produced an extensive survey of 5000 respondents project to investigate evangelisation practices, and provide some recommendations in England and Wales. Some tensions were discussed among the main themes identified, such as Catholic ghetto mentality and openness to the world and engagement with it, the necessity of listening to respondents' experiences and not imposing onto them as teachers. When confronting the irrelevance of the Church in respondents' lives, observations were made about the necessity to be confident enough to criticise the Church, about living with questions about the faith and not the answers, a dialogical approach to evangelisation including intra-ecclesial dialogue, and mutual respect and celebrating diversity: "there is no one size fits all"³³.

Small scale qualitative studies

Other small qualitative studies might shed more light on people's in-depth motivations when choosing to leave the Church and also to stay in the Church. For example, one of the other small scale studies looked at Catholic Young Adults in England and Wales for some answers to why they stay in the Church and to identify some main factors "which make the transmission of faith successful within a contemporary milieu of cultural and creedal interruption"³⁴. The online survey of 160 individuals and 21 semi-structured interviews was used to find out "what young people themselves identified as key to their faith development and sense of ecclesial belonging"³⁵.

This study did not focus on those on edge or who came to the Church occasionally. Instead, it aimed to look at those who were "highly committed" or "super core", in other words, who remained in the Church, and to identify some factors that kept them there. Also, this study focused on a relatively small sample of individuals within the 18–39 age range without parental responsibilities.

According to North (2018), the main findings identified the family as the main locus of faith transmission. The majority of the respondents were raised in the faith and many identified significant roles played by priests, mentors, retreats, Catholic university chaplaincies and ecclesial movements. Among many pastoral proposals, including having mentors in hospitable Eucharistic communities (belonging), the importance of faith formation stood out, with an especial emphasis on the need for a more apologetic approach.

At the same time as the Catholic Young Adults in England and Wales study, a more extensive study was commissioned by the Catholic Church in England in 2018.

³³ Philip Knights and Andrea Murray, *Evangelisation in England and Wales. A Report to the Catholic Bishops* (London, England: Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2002), <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2019/07/evangelisation-eng-wales-2002.pdf>.

³⁴ North, *Research among Catholic...*, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

This study aimed to identify major typologies of young people who consider themselves Catholic, stand for justice, but rarely attend Sunday Mass or even pray³⁶. This study can shed more light on how young people believe and belong to the Catholic Church today. Complex and unexpected religious identities of young people were revealed. Many Catholics might be surprised that very few young people who consider themselves Catholics go to Mass and pray regularly. This is clearly indicated in the following text from the survey report:

When we think of Catholic young people, we tend to think about people like ‘Lucy’ – people who go to Mass and pray regularly and stand up against injustice. They are the sort of young person who we probably see – or think we see – at Church on a Sunday and who go to World Youth Day. However, very few people would fit in that group. Even those people whom we may see regularly at Mass – people like ‘Anna’ – don’t necessarily say that they pray regularly. And even fewer of those like ‘Benji’ and ‘Lauren’, who actively stand up against injustice, are going to be found at Mass or regularly praying.³⁷

This report shed some light on the people who are on the “margins” of the Catholic Church. One thousand respondents 15–25 years old were reached via an online survey. Strikingly enough, only 10% of respondents view the Church positively, and only 30% of all respondents saw the future of the Church positively. The authors of the report made a disclaimer on the methodology used by identifying that typologies were “constructed” by manipulating statistical data and are not the only possible view³⁸.

This report concurs with many previous research studies’ conclusions that the variety of people is immense. Typologies range from people who adhere to the Church teaching and attend Sunday Mass (minority) to the other side of the spectrum who claim that “The Church isn’t relevant to me. I need to be my own person”, representing about 40% of all respondents³⁹. The quote picked by the report authors to end the report echoes similar aspirations delineated in 2002 by Philip Knights and Andrea Murray, “The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries”⁴⁰.

Many authors of studies make assumptions about for the reasons why some people stay in the Church and why some people leave. One of the reasons is an interrupted transmission from parents to children rather than with adult (de)conversion. According to Woodhead, adults sometimes change their minds, “but the more important story has to do with children”⁴¹.

³⁶ Curtin and Davies, *Complex Catholicism*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁰ Knights and Murray, *Evangelisation in England and Wales*, 40.

⁴¹ Woodhead, “The Rise of “no Religion”, 249.

To address a gap in previous studies that looked at young people who adhere strongly to the Church and those who are committed, but do not attend Mass, a different study was employed to see some motivation of those still young, but with family responsibilities. A small-scale study was commissioned in 2014 by the Department for Evangelisation and Catechesis, Catholic Bishops' Conference England and Wales, to investigate young parents' views who were baptised in the Catholic faith and decided to send their children to primary Catholic school⁴². Most of these respondents sent their children to Catholic school; however, they never or rarely attended Mass in their parishes. Although the sample was very small, only 39 parents took part in in-depth interviews, and 107 completed a short qualitative questionnaire; this study gave a snapshot of adults with parental responsibilities and perhaps with more complex and challenging life experiences.

The study asked parents how they express their Catholic faith and why they seek a Catholic education for their children, questions were asked about their Sunday Mass attendance, and ways they might like to grow in faith and possibly reconnect with parish life. Belief in God and resonance with basic Christian values were expressed as the most important aspects of their faith. For some of the parents, their Catholic school Mass was the only experience of a Catholic Mass. This means the parents might not have attended or would not attend parish Mass if their children were not in the Catholic school.

A general perception was that "regular Mass attendance was not part of Catholic identity for their generation"⁴³. Many stated that the Mass time was not family-life-friendly. Also, they did not feel welcome with small children. When asked what the key re-engagement moments with the parish were, some identified pastoral work, better communication, and findings outlets for their gifts and talent. However, most parents did not know people in their parish and did not want to get engaged in parish life. One of the main reasons for that was long working hours and lack of time.

From these three small-scale studies, it is clear that the motivation to belong and attend Sunday Mass might differ among those who still consider themselves Catholics and would not fall into a category of "disaffiliated". At the same time, they do not belong to the Church in a traditional "technical" sense.

Different responses offered to address the "drift"

In response to the Catholic studies and survey results, some authors conclude that the respondents stories are "A glimpse of the interface between our secular, postmodern

⁴² Cason, *Challenges and Opportunities*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4.

reality and the Church <...> into both, the Church's failure in her mission, but also the signs of hope about how the Church might be more effective."⁴⁴

In response to this drift, suggestions were made for parishes to discuss, explore and debate rigorously the authenticity of belief in God. From the different studies results, analysis and far-reaching pastoral conclusions were made about the "failure" of the methods the Church has used to pass on the faith⁴⁵. Although the main remedies of more rigorous philosophical discussion, catechesis and evangelisation were offered to prevent more Catholics from leaving the Church, the researchers recognised that the reality of disaffiliation is more complex. "Ignorance of doctrine" was warned about by the General Catechetical Directory back in 1971, and a remedy then was offered to be "more frequent catechetical instruction"⁴⁶. However, the authors of the Portsmouth survey claim that it is inevitable that the "entire catechetical enterprise need to be renewed"⁴⁷. Maybe the situation might shift where fewer disaffiliates might feel that their spiritual search for God was unfulfilled in the Church. Some authors are convinced that there is a need for the Church to move "towards a wide-reaching, pastoral paradigm shift"⁴⁸. This is where the researchers of the Portsmouth survey see the answer, which Pope Francis called "missionary transformation"⁴⁹ in his call for "a missionary option capable of transforming everything"⁵⁰.

As a missionary transformation, the researchers offered:

The proposal that a paradigm shift in parish life is needed if the Church is to be more effective both at withstanding the corrosive acids of secularism and religious indifference – which, in many ways, is the same task – at making disciples.⁵¹

This paradigm shift is defined in several areas of Church life, including prioritising the weekend, hospitality, music, homilies, meaningful community, clear expectations, strength-based ministry, formation of small communities, the experience of the Holy Spirit and becoming an inviting Church.

Focus on the Church

Some theologians in the US, such as Gabriel Moran, professor emeritus of educational philosophy at New York University, with more than fifty years of educational

⁴⁴ Bullivant et al., *Why Catholics Leave*, 110.

⁴⁵ Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*, 112.

⁴⁶ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, rev. ed (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2002), §9.

⁴⁷ Bullivant et al., *Why Catholics Leave*, 113.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, §27.

⁵¹ Bullivant et al., *Why Catholics Leave*, 118.

experience in the Catholic Church in his recent book *Missed Opportunities: Rethinking Catholic Tradition*⁵², argues that the Vatican II reforms did not go far enough. His theological work looks at the nature of Catholic tradition to invite theologians to reconsider how to bring that tradition into conversation with contemporary issues such as Church language of teaching, birth control and euthanasia, sexuality, non-Christian revelation, human rights, environment, etc. In his theological investigation, he resonates with all major themes expressed by the respondents of the surveys of the disaffiliates sponsored by the Catholic Church. Moran proposes a pathway for the Church to follow to “undergo an honest and thorough reform”⁵³.

In Moran’s⁵⁴ view the Church “likes to move at a pace at which change can be brought about during decades and centuries”; however, “today’s world does not allow for that kind of leisurely movement”⁵⁵. For example, his interpretation of the questionnaire results that were sent to all the dioceses across the world prior to the Synod of the Family in 2014 is challenging:

What are bishops to do if, in response to a question on contraception, more than 90 per cent of married church members say, ‘Yes, we use contraceptives; it would be immoral not to do so’.⁵⁶

Moran believes that the bishops should not try to “shout louder”. They need to “rethink their position” and that the language used in the Church is inadequate “to bring about major reforms of the Church”⁵⁷. According to Moran:

A movement in the 1960s that declared God dead has been outlasted by believers in God. The 1970 were a time of explosive religious growth around the world. When the Soviet empire dissolved, religion emerged from hiding and showed surprising vitality. To many secular thinkers, this turn of events was just further evidence of human delusion and superstition. But even people sceptical of religion would do well to try to understand what religion is and why it does not go away.⁵⁸

In response to the survey results of Catholics and those who already left the Church, Moran’s answer in many ways resembles Bullivant’s⁵⁹ observation as well:

⁵² Gabriel Moran, *Missed Opportunities: Rethinking Catholic Tradition* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2016).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 14–17.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁵⁹ Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*.

What most people need in order to sustain a religious life in adulthood are supportive friends, occasional discussions, and meaningful rituals at life's crucial moments of joy and sadness.⁶⁰

Moran's answer to the disaffiliation lies in the Church's educational institutions and communities. Moran⁶¹ claims Catholic institutions, including schools and universities, do not engage in academic enquiries that would be challenging enough and "their formation is not particular enough":

Endless talk about Catholic doctrines is not religious education. What deserves the title of a comprehensive religious education is teaching people religion with all the breadth and depth of intellectual excitement that one is capable of and teaching people to be religious with all the particularity of the verbal and nonverbal symbols that shape a way of life.⁶²

Moran's reflections resonate in some ways with the Knights and Murray's *On the Way to Life*⁶³ pastoral suggestions expressed almost two decades ago. Hanvey⁶⁴ also identified the "crisis of transmission" as one of the key factors with which religious education, catechesis and formation must deal, including conceptual, structural and interpersonal dimensions. They offered a vision where the process of "transmission" is facilitated in the context of constant engagement of internal and secular cultural realities. Therefore, dialogue, imagination and courage are required, including some risk-taking.

Focus on a pastoral approach of disinterested: unconditional love

Fr James Mallon, co-contributor of the Portsmouth Survey analysis, follows the similar thinking pattern when analysing respondents' responses claiming that:

There never has been, and never will be a perfect solution. There never will be a version of the Church – a parish or an expression of Catholic Christianity – that will compel no one to leave and all to return.⁶⁵

Fr Mallon is a world-renowned practical theologian who created a process used by 4968 of Catholic parishes in 2023 in many English-speaking countries "to help parishes make transformational steps forward in the journey from maintenance to

⁶⁰ Moran, *Missed Opportunities*, 229.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 229.

⁶³ Hanvey, *On the Way to Life*, 66.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 28.

⁶⁵ Bullivant et al., *Why Catholics Leave*, 127.

mission”⁶⁶. He recognises that Portsmouth’s content “sounds too familiar from the other side of the Atlantic”:

What must we do? Any expression of outreach not rooted in the disinterested, unconditional love of those we are attempting to reach will be ineffective <...> unless there is a true change of heart.⁶⁷

The many survey results show that many disaffiliates hold their Christian values dear and would like to pass them on to their children in the future; they value Catholic schools and the Christian education their children get there. Mallon claims that many of them are hurt “by the way they were treated” by a priest or the events in their life. Church responses were not always welcoming and loving when they sought some comfort and understanding⁶⁸.

Mallon suggests that it is time to consider how isolated individuals with their idiosyncratic personal histories can be accommodated and provided with transformational spaces where they can rediscover the meaning of faith, and start seeing the Church, and especially the Catholic faith, in a new light. The Directory for Catechesis⁶⁹ (2020), says what evangelisation and catechesis should be:

The mission is still the same, but the language by which the Gospel is proclaimed must be renewed with pastoral wisdom. ‘Tradition may speak to the cultures in the world today and help them to be open to the eternal fruitfulness of the message of Christ’. Pope Francis, “Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation”, 29th May 2015.⁷⁰

The mandate to experiment

The Church is acutely aware of the growing disaffiliation and decline in Catholic numbers in Western societies by acknowledging the complexity of our time, which is pervaded by profound changes, where:

Churches of ancient tradition are often marked by phenomena of detachment from lived ecclesial and faith experiences. The ecclesial journey itself is marked by difficulties and by the need for spiritual, and pastoral renewal.

⁶⁶ James Mallon et al., “Afterword: “What Must We Do?”, in Bullivant et al., *Why Catholics Leave*, 127.

⁶⁷ Bullivant et al., *Why Catholics Leave*, 128.

⁶⁸ Mallon et al., “Afterword: “What Must We Do?”, 128.

⁶⁹ Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation, *Directory for Catechesis* (London: The Incorporated Catholic Truth Society, 2020).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, §207.

And yet the Holy Spirit continues to arouse the thirst for God within people, and within the Church a new fervour, new methods, and new expressions for the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.⁷¹

Therefore, the Church tries to provide effective guidance on addressing these challenges. The Directory for Catechesis⁷² focuses on this new stage of evangelisation which concerns the whole life of the Church by focusing on “ordinary pastoral care” of Christian communities, the baptised who no longer experience the consolation born of faith and “those who do not know Jesus Christ or who have always rejected him”⁷³. The Church strongly believes that many people from both its last target groups are quietly seeking God and are “led by a yearning to see his face, even in countries of ancient Christian tradition”⁷⁴ and that these people should be:

Supported by a genuine pastoral ministry of first proclamation, capable of undertaking the initiatives for presenting the good news of the faith explicitly, concretely manifesting the power of mercy, the very heart of the Gospel, and fostering the incorporation of those who convert into the ecclesial community.⁷⁵

In his letter to the new Prefect of the Dicastery for the Faith, Pope Francis clearly delineated the approach to evangelisation. At the project’s core should be the teaching that flows from “the faith to give a reason for our hope, but not as enemies who point out and condemn”⁷⁶. Our evangelisation endeavours aim to enter into conversation with people from all walks of life, beliefs and non-beliefs. He called them “people of the world” in an “unprecedented context for humanity” where they should not be imposed on by a single way of interpreting the revealed Word, a single understanding and expressing of the truth. He urged to adopt a “harmonious growth nurtured by respect and love” approach, which in turn will preserve the Christian doctrine more effectively. In the words of Pope Francis, the Church claims to present a God “who loves, forgives, saves, liberates, and promotes people and calls them to fraternal service”⁷⁷. Our kerygmatic message, therefore, should focus on what is the most essential, the most beautiful, the most attractive, and at the same time, the most necessary, and secondary issues should not overshadow it.

⁷¹ Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation, *Directory for Catechesis*, §38.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., §39.

⁷⁴ Ibid., §40.

⁷⁵ Ibid., §41.

⁷⁶ „Pope Asks New Prefect of DDF to Guard the Faith in Unprecedented Context for Humanity“, *Vatican News*, 1 July 2023, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-07/pope-letter-new-prefect-dicastery-doctrine-faith-fernandez.html>.

⁷⁷ Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation, *Directory for Catechesis*, §68.

This approach does not have a readily available template and might differ depending on the sociocultural, historical contexts where nonbelievers encounter the Church's teaching. Therefore, the Pope gives us the mandate to be brave to experiment. This mandate is explicated for the universal Church and had a cascading effect already. For example, in the letter '*To All Involved in the Mission of Education in Catholic Schools*', the Holy See urges all who are involved in the mission of education in Catholic schools to develop:

Initiatives and even experiments that are imaginative and creative, open to sharing with one another and to concern for the future, exact in their analysis yet like a breath of fresh air in their outlook. May the fear of risks not dampen the spirit of boldness; a crisis is no time for hiding one's head in the sand, but for gazing up at the stars, like Abraham (cf. Gen 15:5).⁷⁸

These and other Church documents did not appear from thin air. They are brought into being by a rich tradition of innovation and creativity the Church has endeavoured throughout history when faced with extraordinary times. Now and again, the Church becomes relevant to the world and humanity. The extraordinary times we live in today require similar brave experiments.

Conclusion

Evidence suggests a significant decline in religious practices, belonging, and interest in Christianity in Western societies, particularly in Western Europe. Extensive research projects in England and Wales have aimed to understand the reasons behind this decline in religious practices and the religious stance of young people. While quantitative surveys provide general trends regarding religiosity, they often lack theological depth. Qualitative studies have revealed a multifaceted religious identity that is not always clearly defined, with many Catholics neither attending church nor holding strong beliefs. Pastoral theologians propose the creation of transformative spaces for individuals to rediscover their faith and perceive the Church in a new light. Pope Francis advocates for a missionary transformation and invites innovative catechetical and evangelisation approaches to reach out to those disconnected from the Catholic tradition.

⁷⁸ Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and the Dicastery for Culture and Education, "To All Involved in the Mission of Education in Catholic Schools", 28 June 2023, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/28/230628e.html>.

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SIEKIANT GILIAU SUPRASTI PALIEKANČIUOSIUS KATALIKŲ BAŽNYČIĄ: IŽVALGOS PASTORACIJAI

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje keliami problema, kad praktikuojančių katalikų skaičius Vakarų pasaulio šalyse, tarp jų ir Jungtinėje Karalystėje, sparčiai mažėja. Pavyzdžiui, Anglijoje vos 13 proc. vaikystėje pakrikštytų suaugusių lanko bažnyčią kiekvieną sekmadienį. Net 37 proc. vaikystėje pakrikštytųjų neišpažįsta jokios religijos. Per paskutinius keletą dešimtmečių buvo atlikta nemažai mokslinių tyrimų naudojant kiekybinius ir kokybinius tyrimo metodus. Užsakydama daugelį šių tyrimų, Katalikų Bažnyčia aktyviai siekė geriau suvokti šią problemą. Jaunimo ir suaugusiųjų buvo klausama, kodėl jie paliko Katalikų Bažnyčią ir kas jiems padėtų į ją sugrįžti. Tyrimų rezultatai atskleidė daugybines priežastis, susijusias su asmeniniais gyvenimo pokyčiais, pasaulėžiūros raida bei Bažnyčioje patirtais skaudžiais išgyvenimais. Tyrimai taip pat parodė, kad dalis respondentų save laiko katalikais ir aktyviai įsijungia į bažnytinės veiklas, nors bažnyčios reguliariai nelanko ir net nesimeldžia. Straipsnyje taip pat pateikiama žymių katalikų teologų analizė apie Vatikano II Susirinkimo pasekmes bei diskusija apie neišnaudotas Bažnyčios galimybes komunikuojant moralinį mokymą. Siūloma drąsiai sekti Popiežiaus Pranciškaus raginimu nebijoti eksperimentuoti ir teologo kun. J. Mallono požiūriu su besąlygiška meile žvelgti į tuos, kurie Bažnyčią paliko arba yra ant palikimo slenksčio.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: atsiskyrimas, religinės tapatybės, šv. Mišių lankymas, pastoracija.

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