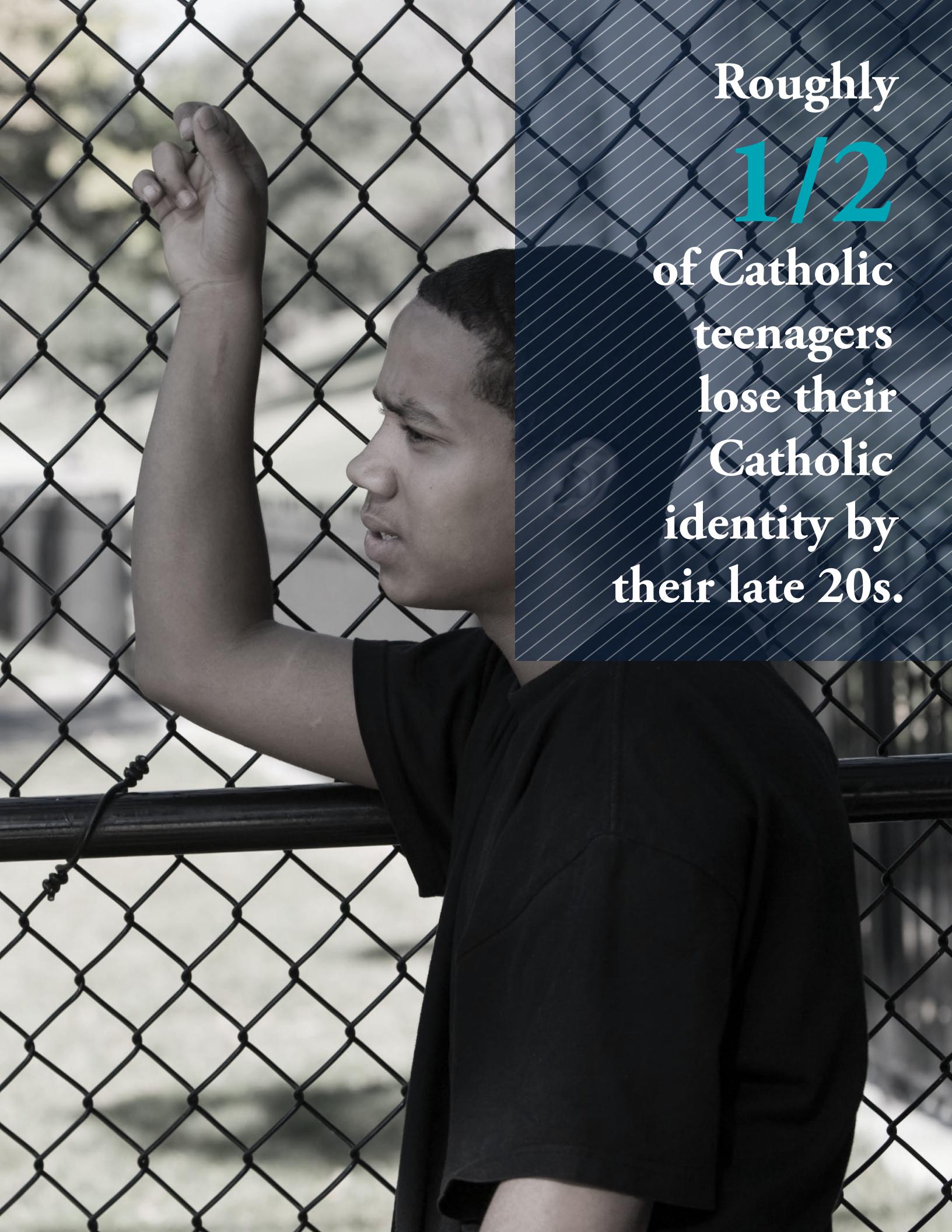


**UNDERSTANDING**  
Findings from a National Study  
**FORMER YOUNG**  
of American Emerging Adults  
**CATHOLICS**

Nicolette Manglos-Weber and Christian Smith





A photograph of a young man with short dark hair, wearing a black t-shirt. He is leaning his left arm against a black metal railing, with his hand resting on a chain-link fence. He is looking off to the right of the frame with a neutral expression. The background is a bright, slightly out-of-focus outdoor area.

Roughly  
**1/2**  
of Catholic  
teenagers  
lose their  
Catholic  
identity by  
their late 20s.

# WHY IS THE LOSS OF CATHOLIC IDENTITY SO COMMON? WHAT DO THESE EMERGING ADULTS WHO USED TO BE CATHOLIC BELIEVE, THINK, AND FEEL ABOUT RELIGIOUS FAITH? AND WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THEM ABOUT SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN FORMING FAITHFUL CATHOLIC YOUNG ADULTS?

For Catholic adults hoping to pass on the Catholic faith to the next generation, the statistics can be distressing. They seem to validate the predictions of social theorists who see religion's influence receding in politics, morality, and daily life. Some fear that the loss of a direct connection to the Catholic Church is a sign of the Church inevitably diminishing in importance to the private lives of a devout few.

Yet religion is much more than what can be expressed in the time it takes to answer a survey. To truly understand what is going on among emerging adults who used to identify as Catholic, we must inquire about their specific beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and experiences in relation to religion, God, faith, and church. We must ask them to explain what their loss of a Catholic identity means and does not mean. We have to listen to them directly.

This report does just that by drawing on data from a national, multi-wave study. Beginning in the early 2000s, we randomly selected more than 3,000 U.S. teenagers and then collected detailed survey data from both them and their parents. Over the subsequent decade, we followed up with these youth three more times, most recently in 2013, surveying the majority of those with whom we could sustain contact after multiple moves and transitions (about 65

percent of the original group). We also chose about 300 of the original group to meet for extensive one-on-one conversations about their families, friendships, religious lives, schooling, romantic relationships, and beliefs about the world. At each wave of data collection, we continued to interview several hundred of these youth in coffee shops, libraries, and offices around the country.

In this report, we focus on emerging adults who self-identified as Catholic when they were teenagers but later dropped that Catholic identity. These total to 243 surveyed youth out of the 819 Catholics we surveyed altogether. We combine their responses to the survey with insights gained from personal interviews with 25 emerging adults who also

used to identify as Catholic but stopped doing so.

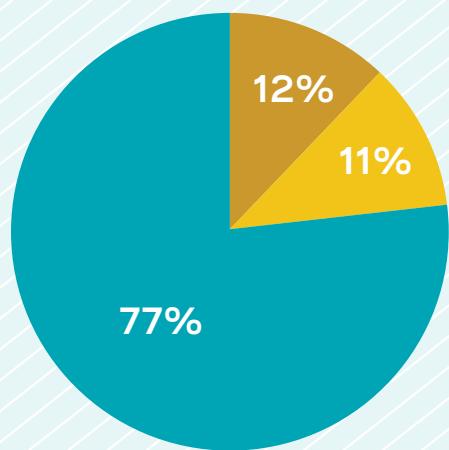
After looking closely at current and former Catholic young adults, we find both causes for concern and reasons to hope. On the one hand, many of them feel alienated from or suspicious of organized religion. Many think religion violates the principles of science and logic. Many are simply more consumed with other things, like getting through school, spending time with friends, finding a romantic partner, getting a good job, and making ends meet. Many of them are resistant to the idea of doctrine or the suggestion that religion is anything more than a personal choice, like the kind of music one prefers.

On the other hand, many formerly Catholic emerging adults still believe in and

pray to God, and have views of God not far from Catholic teaching. Many of them see value in the Church's charity work and think religion is generally a good thing for society. Some are open to the idea of going back to the Church, particularly when they think about starting a family of their own. Part of their transition away from the Catholic Church is, we suggest, a function of where they are in the course of their lives. The Church needs to understand them in their particular place in life and to seek them out. In short, what we observe is something less than full-blown "secularization." Religion and faith are still evident everywhere in their stories, even if not in ways that the Church normally considers faithful.

## CURRENT CATHOLICS, FORMER CATHOLICS, AND OTHER RELIGIOUS TYPES AMONG ALL AMERICAN EMERGING ADULTS, AGES 23-28

- █ CATHOLICS
- █ FORMER CATHOLICS
- █ OTHER



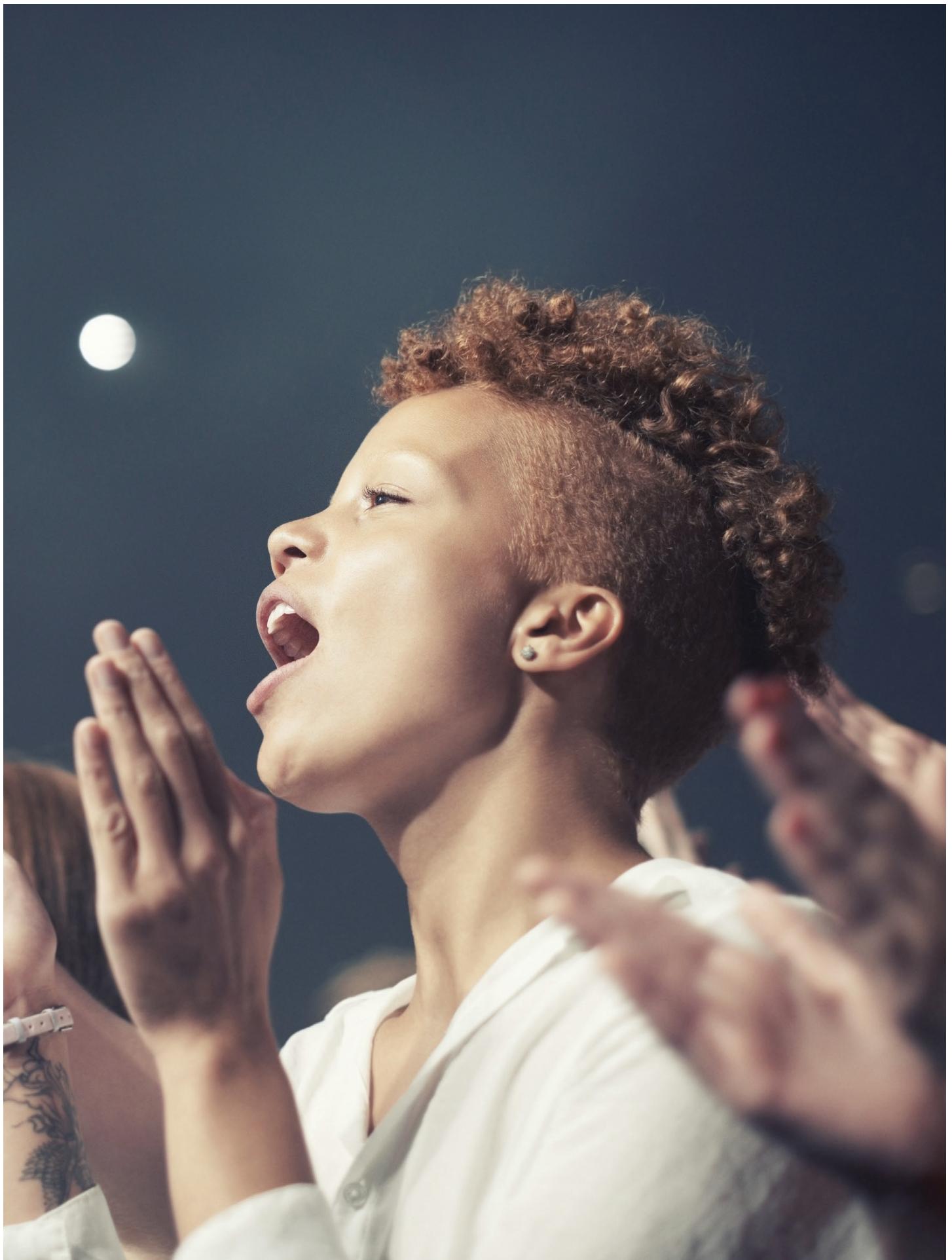
# THE CONTEXT: EMERGING ADULTHOOD

The people we describe in this report are in a phase of life called “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2004). This term refers to the time in the mid- to late 20s when young people have (usually) finished high school but may still be in college, and have not yet married, had children, or established permanent careers. For many Americans in their 20s, achieving the status of “adult” is the result of an ongoing and often interrupted process rather than the product of a one-time achievement, such as turning 21, graduating, marrying, having kids, or getting a job. In fact, for some emerging adults, it is increasingly uncertain whether obtaining these traditional benchmarks of adulthood is even possible or desirable.

In sociology, the “life course perspective” views people’s beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the context of the particular stages of life they occupy, exploring how certain factors in earlier stages of life lead to different outcomes in later stages (Elder 1985). Taking this perspective on Catholic

emerging adults, we can see that they are in a pivotal stage linking childhood (a period of vulnerability and being supported by others) to adulthood (a period of independence and supporting others). This life course stage demands that they (1) establish a personal identity and worldview to motivate them through adulthood, and (2) simultaneously stay flexible in their worldviews to accommodate the rapid changes they undergo in work, relationships, and place of residence. They must find a balance between stability and adaptability.

What formerly Catholic emerging adults say about religious faith, how they say it, and what they mean by it must be understood in light of the culture and relationships in which they are embedded and the demands of their life course transitions. However much they may stress the personal or private nature of religious faith—as they often do—their worldviews are inevitably shaped by what it means to exist in the life course stage called emerging adulthood today.



# 1.

## FORMER CATHOLICS STILL (MOSTLY) BELIEVE IN AND INTERACT WITH (SOME VERSION OF) GOD.

Staunch atheism is still fairly uncommon among Americans, and the same holds true for formerly Catholic emerging adults.

Sara, for example, is a 28-year-old Latina raised by a Catholic father and a non-religious mother. She has worked many different jobs and is still “finding herself.” Her father took her to church regularly as a child, but now she never attends. She self-identifies as “non-religious.” We asked Sara if she had any religious beliefs, and she had this to say:

“I don’t think so, but sometimes when I look at things, I’m like, God will work it out.” She laughed. “I sometimes feel that certain things happen for a reason, you know, some higher being. You see those Hallmark cards—When one door closes, another opens, or God is saving this for bigger things—and I’m like, alright!”

Sara spent some time in the Navy, and she recounted specific moments in which she found comfort in the belief that God will work things out, saying:

“In the Navy, my last office was across from the chaplain’s. And I thought they were just as cool as can be... Everything was, well, God’s gonna take care of this. And I was like, I wanna fall back on God.”

Sara’s image of God is vague, certainly, but it is fairly consistent in her life, and it is something she relies on when she faces unexplainable or difficult situations.

Joe’s life looks quite different from Sara’s, in that he is highly educated, white, and established in a salaried career. Joe identifies as agnostic. Growing up, his father was a non-practicing Catholic, and his mother transitioned through a series of religions. Having watched his mother search but never find what she was looking for, Joe has been skeptical of any one version of God or supernatural reality.

Yet at one point in our interview, he revealed his inclination to believe in some sort of divine being, and admitted that relying on chance as an explanation for the existence of the

world was dissatisfying: “There is something to the supernatural. If it’s just coincidence, it’s a little too plain for me.”

Perhaps even more surprisingly, he later claimed to pray: “I pray in my own way. I kind of think of it as having intentions for people. Like, there’s a lot of times in my day when I’ll stop and pause, and I’ll be like, man, I really hope so-and-so gets their job. And you know, that doesn’t have some of the formalities of prayer, but it has the same kind of result or motivation.”

At another point, Joe referred to prayer as “asking for something good,” but he is unsure who he’s talking to exactly—maybe “the universe,” maybe “the big man with the bushy white beard.” In spite of this uncertainty, however, he still prays on a regular basis and, like Sara, he appreciates the value it has in moments of stress or insecurity.

## DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD? (PERCENTS)

■ YES

■ NO

■ DON'T KNOW / UNSURE

FORMER CATHOLICS

57.26

CATHOLICS

87.94

OTHER

71.46

## DO YOU EVER PRAY BY YOURSELF ALONE?

■ YES, FREQUENTLY

■ YES, RARELY

■ NO

FORMER CATHOLICS

33.06

CATHOLICS

56.03

OTHER

54.77

**DESCRIPTION OF TABLES:** Only 19 percent of former Catholics no longer believe in God. A majority—57 percent—still do, and another 24 percent are unsure. The practice of prayer is less common, yet 57 percent of former Catholic emerging adults still pray at least sometimes. “Frequent” prayer is defined as once a week or more, while “rare” prayer is defined as several times a month or less (but not never).

## 2.

### FORMERLY CATHOLIC EMERGING ADULTS TEND TO BE UNCOMFORTABLE WITH FIRM STATEMENTS ABOUT WHO OR WHAT GOD IS. THEY LIKE TO KEEP SUCH MATTERS OPEN-ENDED.

Given the need for flexibility in this extended transitory stage of life, it is not surprising that formerly Catholic emerging adults avoid strong claims about theology. As they converse about how they see and experience the world, it is clear they are experts in seeing both sides of almost everything. In this they are not unique. Emerging adults of various religious

backgrounds are similarly reticent to make strong claims about religious truth. Perhaps one of the most common types of statements made about religious truth in all of our emerging adult interviews is some version of “it depends”—what works for one person might not work for someone else, and very few if any general statements can or should be made about God, faith, and morality.

Sometimes, as in the case of Joe, former Catholics consciously embrace an open-ended viewpoint. When talking about his agnosticism, Joe claimed:

“I’m so okay with the uncertainty. I think uncertainty is beautiful. I think the most beautiful works of art are the ones that lead you to asking questions as opposed to those trying

#### WHAT IS YOUR VIEW OF GOD?

(PERCENTS)

- █ GOD IS A PERSONAL BEING INVOLVED IN THE LIVES OF PEOPLE TODAY
- █ GOD CREATED THE WORLD BUT IS NO LONGER INVOLVED IN IT
- █ GOD IS NOT PERSONAL, BUT IS SOMETHING LIKE A COSMIC LIFE FORCE
- █ DON’T KNOW / NONE OF THE ABOVE
- █ DON’T BELIEVE IN GOD

#### FORMER CATHOLICS

33.47 █ 25.62 █

#### CATHOLICS

58.82 █ 20.00 █

#### OTHER

50.61 █ 18.6 █

**DESCRIPTION OF TABLES:**  
Most former Catholics believe in God but do not see God as a personal being. More than one-quarter of them, in fact,

refrain from agreeing with any of the common views of God we asked about. Taken together with what they say in their own words, it seems they are

hesitant to commit to any clear view of God at this time in their lives.

## DO YOU THINK IT IS OKAY FOR SOMEONE OF YOUR / ANY RELIGION TO PRACTICE OTHER RELIGIONS?

█ YES      █ NO      █ DON'T KNOW / NOT ASKED

**FORMER CATHOLICS**

67.49

**CATHOLICS**

55.25

**OTHER**

48.60

to supply answers to what something is."

He then said that for him, the essence of spirituality is "being comfortable with questions."

Another young man, Brian, reported on his survey that he is "not religious," but in his interview, his religious life is clearly more complex than that. He was raised Catholic by his mother, but now

describes himself in person as "just Christian"—no other labels—and he periodically goes to a nondenominational church with his father. And even though he definitely believes in God, he still resists getting more specific:

"I'm just a Christian who believes in God. I mean, you know, I think 96 percent of the world believes in some type of God. I mean, why

can't...why do we have to label it?"

For Brian, the essence of spirituality seems to boil down to relating to or "staying in touch" with God. He believes in one God, but he feels most religions are different versions on the same theme: love each other, believe in God, don't hurt anyone, and for everything else, live and let live.

## INCLUDES PRACTICES FROM OTHER RELIGIONS IN SPIRITUALITY

█ YES      █ NO

**FORMER CATHOLICS**

26.70

**CATHOLICS**

19.11

**OTHER**

23.32

Most formerly Catholic emerging adults also think it is fine to practice more than one religion. Also, compared to Catholics and other

respondents, slightly more of them incorporate practices from other religions into their own spirituality.

(Note: these two questions were asked in the third wave of the NSYR survey, conducted in 2008, when respondents were 18–23 years old.)

### 3.

## FORMER CATHOLICS, LIKE MOST EMERGING ADULTS, LIVE IN RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIP NETWORKS.

Because emerging adults often have family, friends, or acquaintances who follow different faiths, questions of theology and religious doctrine aren't abstract musings—they can be quite personal. To believe in only one religion or profess only one version of God implies, in the minds of many emerging adults, that these other people are in error or will be judged by God. This makes it difficult for them to accept the idea that only one religious faith tradition represents the full truth.

Hannah, for example, was raised in a household of two religions. Her mother is Catholic, and her father is Jewish; both came from religiously devout families. Hannah and her sister grew up attending Catholic schools, and Hannah believes her mother is still somewhat religious, but there was very little religious activity in their home. They never practiced Hanukkah, and they spent their Christmas breaks on the beach.

Brian—the young man who was raised Catholic, now identifies as “not religious,” and periodically attends a nondenominational church—

also grew up with parents of different religions. His mother is a devout Catholic, and his father is evangelical Protestant. When his parents later divorced, choosing his own religion felt tied to which parent he would align himself with more generally. In his case, it was his father.

We asked Brian, “How similar are you to your parents in terms of your religious beliefs and practices?”

Brian responded, “Very similar to my dad. We grew up Catholic because of my mom, and my dad went. He's a very religious guy, but he's more of—I don't know—Christian Pentecostal, ‘speaking in the word of the Lord’ type stuff. So once they divorced, he went to his own church. More and more, I follow him to church.”

Elsewhere throughout the conversation, Brian talked about how he doesn't like labels. So while his choice to mark “non-religious” on the survey may seem odd given that he believes in God, calls himself a Christian in the interview, and sometimes attends church with his dad, it makes sense on another level as

a rejection of labels, which tend to divide rather than unite in his family.

Hannah's and Brian's experiences reveal two common outcomes in families that mix religions. First, religion gets talked about at home much less since it has the potential to be a source of conflict; it thus plays a more minor role in childhood experiences and socialization. Second, children like Brian tend to avoid committing to one religion, in part because it symbolizes or actually involves “siding with” one parent over the other.

Similar dynamics are also at work in emerging adults' friendship circles. Hannah's close friendships exhibit the same religious diversity as her family. When we asked her if her closest friends are religiously similar to her, she revealed that the answer is more complicated than “yes” or “no”:

“It depends. It's different for all of them. I mean, my sister—she's like the same as me. Sandy [her friend] is basically the same—she's not religious. And my friend

Amanda, my freshman-year roommate—she's very religious. Her family is Catholic, and she takes her faith very seriously, and we learned long ago not to get in arguments about it because we were not going to convince each other of anything. You have your beliefs and I have mine, and does it really matter in the long run? And then [my other friend]—she's religious, but she's Jewish. Some of her family is pretty orthodox. She'll use her

phone and drive on the weekend on the Sabbath, but her parents won't."

Similar to many religiously diverse families, the nature of Hannah's friendship network means that religion is more likely to be a source of conflict than a basis for drawing relationships closer. And although we don't always know which comes first—the religiously diverse friendships or the loss of one's earlier religious identity—it seems clear that they are often

mutually reinforcing factors.

Further, although it is difficult to know whether diverse networks or disaffiliation came first, we do see that former Catholics mix together religiously similar and dissimilar friendships more than the average for the total sample, and more than those who stayed Catholic (as shown on the next page). Former Catholics are also distinct in that more of them report that none of their close friends is at all religious.

## PARENT RELIGIOUS SIMILARITY

■ NEITHER RELIGIOUS      ■ SAME RELIGIOUS FAITH  
■ DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS FAITH      ■ SINGLE PARENT ONLY

FORMER CATHOLICS

21.40

CATHOLICS

14.79

OTHER

15.90

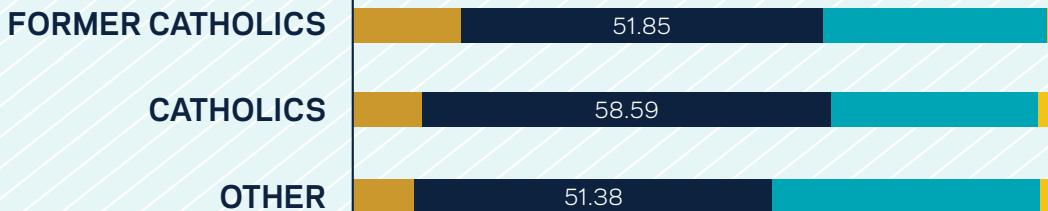
**DESCRIPTION OF TABLE:**  
Compared to other respondents, a somewhat larger percentage of the former Catholics in the survey grew up

in families where their parents were either not religious or practiced different faiths (24 percent versus 16 percent of those who are still Catholic).

By contrast, about 66 percent of those who stayed Catholic grew up in two-parent families of one shared faith.

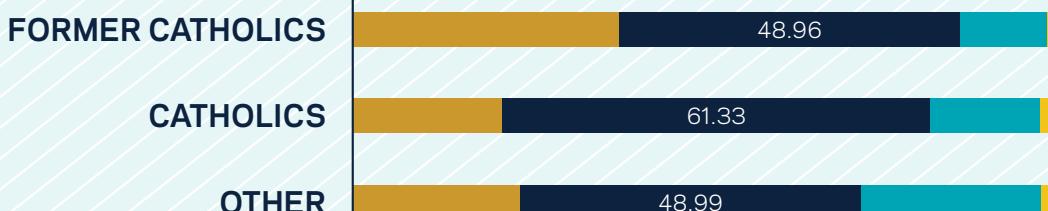
## HOW MANY CLOSEST FRIENDS ARE SIMILAR TO YOURSELF IN BELIEFS ABOUT RELIGION (PERCENTS)

█ NONE    █ SOME    █ ALL    █ NO NAMED FRIENDS



## HOW MANY CLOSEST FRIENDS ARE RELIGIOUS

█ NONE    █ SOME    █ ALL    █ NO NAMED FRIENDS



**DESCRIPTION OF TABLES:**  
Our survey asked respondents to think of up to five of their closest friends, apart from family members, and then we asked them a series of questions about these friends, including questions about

religion. Many of them told us that all of their closest friends were similar to themselves in their religious beliefs. Yet just as many others reported religiously diverse friendship circles. So while “birds of a feather”

may “flock together” to some degree and in some cases, emerging adults today tend to have religiously diverse rather than homogenous friendship circles.



# 4.

## FORMER CATHOLICS TEND TO DESCRIBE RELIGIOUS FAITH AS ILLOGICAL OR UNSCIENTIFIC.

Emerging adults struggle to reconcile some of the teachings of Catholicism with the principles of scientific proof and logic they usually take as the ultimate authority on truth and reality. Even some emerging adults who identified as Catholic did so almost sheepishly, apologizing for their failure to live completely by the rules of science, as they understand them.

Jordan is a 26-year-old young man who was raised Catholic but is now one of the few staunch atheists in our study. During his 20s, he experienced many changes and upheavals: travelling around the world, finding out his brother was gay (a shock to his devout Catholic mother), losing a friend in the war in Afghanistan, and then seeing his parents separated for several years before eventually reconciling.

Jordan is confident in his atheism because he sees no good scientific proof for the Christian God—no more so than, say, Thor the comic book hero or Vishnu the Hindu deity—and because he has questions that Christianity cannot answer to his satisfaction:

"If there's one thing about religious education...there's just two kinds of problems. ... There are those who come out very indoctrinated, and [then] you have people who just completely fall away. I was in the latter group because ultimately there's a lot of questions you can't answer. One is the classical, if God is omnipotent, can he create a something that he can't lift? Or, why is there human suffering?"

Later on in his interview, Jordan described the incompatibility of logic and God:

"I now understand the natural processes and the Big Bang and all that stuff. I also understand the first-mover problem, being that something can't come from nothing. And therefore, you had to have a creator. Well, then you're going to have to put the same logic to the creator. That he had to come from something, and you run into an infinite loop where it goes, constantly higher and higher circles."

Jordan also criticized his mother's Catholic faith for being "unscientific":

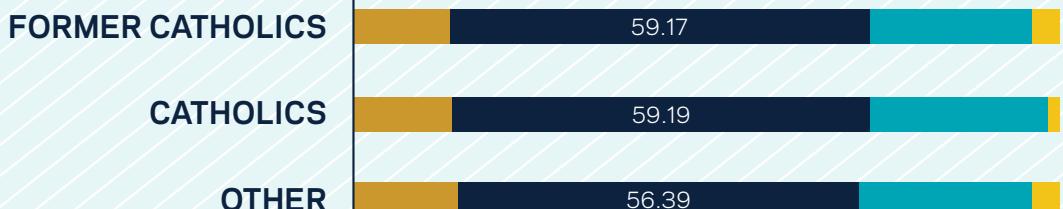
"I don't think she believes it on the merits. I actually don't think anybody really believes in God on the merits of the argument. Rather, they believe it on the idea behind it, that I will cease to exist, and she's afraid of not existing, because it's the only state you can't know. She's really afraid of losing her children, and if it's the method of construction she needs in order to deal with that, I'm fine with that, but I just don't need that construction."

This idea came up again and again in our interviews: science and logic are how we "really" know things about our world, and religious faith either violates or falls short of the standards of scientific knowledge.

## AGREE OR DISAGREE: THE TEACHINGS OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION OFTEN ULTIMATELY CONFLICT WITH EACH OTHER.

(PERCENTS)

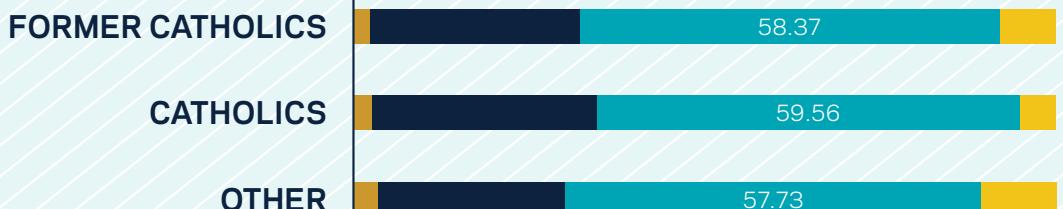
■ STRONGLY AGREE ■ AGREE ■ DISAGREE ■ STRONGLY DISAGREE



## AGREE OR DISAGREE: THE FINDINGS OF SCIENCE AND TEACHING OF RELIGION ARE ENTIRELY COMPATIBLE WITH EACH OTHER.

(PERCENTS)

■ STRONGLY AGREE ■ AGREE ■ DISAGREE ■ STRONGLY DISAGREE



### DESCRIPTION OF TABLES:

Survey responses show that most former Catholics, similar to emerging adults generally, believe that science and religion often conflict with each other. A significant majority of all young adults agree with the statement, "The teachings of science

and religion often ultimately conflict with each other," suggesting the perception of religious faith as "unscientific" is quite pervasive in this generation. In order to verify this finding, we asked the same question but using positive wording, testing agreement with the statement

that religion and science are compatible. We saw the same results—a solid majority of all three groups do not see them as compatible.

(Note: these questions were asked at wave 3. A small number of don't know/refused responses are not shown.)



Even those former Catholic young adults who do continue to believe in God are sometimes rueful about it. They say things about faith like, “I know it’s not scientific, but...” Sara, the Latina emerging adult introduced earlier, is one of those who finds herself thinking about or relying emotionally on God every once in a while, but she is sort of sheepish about this tendency:

“Sometimes things happen, and you don’t know how to explain it,” she reported. “You say, you know, God has a reason for everything.”

So we asked if she sees God as an explanation for the unexplainable.

“Yeah,” she said, “I mean, it’s very unscientific.” She laughed.

Later on in the interview, she again sounded apologetic about her religious beliefs. We asked, “Have you had any doubts about the way you think about religion over the last five years?”

“No,” she replied, “cause they’re so small and unreasonable, it doesn’t really matter.”

“You think your beliefs about religion are unreasonable?” we queried.

“Yeah. Just because they’re like things to fall back on, you know?”

As Sara’s statements above suggest, being “scientific” is seen as being smart, savvy, and realistic about the world we live in. Being “religious,” by implication, is seen as being gullible, naïve, and weak. Sara saw her beliefs as something to “fall back on” in a moment of weakness. Jordan similarly perceived that his Catholic mother believes because she is “fearful.” In this way, former Catholics often talk about believers as those who are not strong enough to face up to the reality proven by science and logic.

When former Catholic emerging adults elaborate on this incompatibility, they often connect it with the notion that belief should be kept open-ended. They often attribute bravery or strength to not knowing the ultimate answers about existence. Strong belief in God or a particular faith at times is seen as unhealthy: it contradicts the value they attach to being flexible and pragmatic about belief in a complicated and diverse world.

Another former Catholic, a 24-year-old white man named Steven, expressed the idea that religious belief can be unhealthy:

“I don’t think that organized religion is evil, I just don’t think it’s a healthy thing. I think a lot of people see organized religion as a solution sometimes. I see a lot of people go to religions, and they just don’t ever grow beyond it.”

Steven later described the value he places on questioning and not knowing:

“I think it’s only natural that people question, even if their solution is to deny or to fully embrace some story. I think it’s human nature to question, and that question, I think, is spirituality. Religion, the way I’ve always differentiated it, seems to be a finite view. It is a story almost always to describe what comes next. Which I feel is the least important part of spirituality. Because it’s something that very few, if anyone, can accurately describe. I don’t necessarily know that when you say the sky is blue, everyone sees the same color of blue. And to try to mandate what that color of blue is feels like a limiting factor. I like to believe that in my inability to fully articulate and express how beautiful existence is, the inability to express in itself is more beautiful than any story that’s ever been created. And I wish it was more okay to just not know.”

## 5.

### FORMER CATHOLICS TEND TO COME FROM HOUSEHOLDS WHERE PARENTS WERE LESS CONSISTENT, LESS COMMITTED, LESS VOCAL, AND LESS SOPHISTICATED ABOUT THEIR FAITH.

Formerly Catholic emerging adults often miss the possible nuances and complexities of religious faith, viewing it simply as a weakness or an unhealthy way of coping with reality. Part of this may be because they are young and can be reactionary in their thinking as they work to establish an independent identity. Another part, however, seems to depend on how well religion was or was not modeled for and taught to them at home as they grew up. Generally, those who hold onto their Catholic identity into the emerging adult years are more likely to have grown up with parents who were consistent, committed, vocal, and reasonably well educated

about Catholicism. Because of this, we suggest they may generally understand Catholic faith better than their formerly Catholic peers and may be less likely to oversimplify and dismiss it.

Parents often wonder if they have any influence over what their children believe religiously as they grow older, especially considering the number of other possible influences. Yet the religious commitments and habits of parents matter tremendously. Using our survey data, we can anticipate quite accurately whether a given teenager will continue to identify as Catholic into emerging adulthood based primarily

on what we know about the religious home environment in which they were raised. Whether an emerging adult continues to identify as Catholic has much to do with whether his or her parents valued and modeled a rich, multifaceted, and consistent religious faith.

### PARENT: HOW OFTEN DOES YOUR FAMILY TALK ABOUT RELIGION?

WEEKLY OR MORE

LESS THAN WEEKLY

NEVER

FORMER CATHOLICS

24.48

CATHOLICS

16.34

OTHER

21.12

**DESCRIPTION OF TABLES:**  
One simple but important factor is how often the teenager's parents attended religious services. Of those who maintained their Catholic identity into emerging adulthood, 52 percent had

parents who attended weekly or more, compared to 30 percent of former Catholics. This relationship extends to other types of church involvement. Although only a minority of parents of any group attended church

activities other than regular worship services weekly or more, 47 percent of the former Catholics never did this, compared to 27 percent of parents of teens who maintained a Catholic identity.

## PARENT: HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU ATTENDED RELGIOUS SERVICES? (PERCENTS)

■ WEEKLY OR MORE      ■ 1-3 TIMES A MONTH  
■ MANY OR A FEW TIMES A YEAR      ■ NEVER

FORMER CATHOLICS

30.45

CATHOLICS

51.75

OTHER

43.42

## PARENT: HOW OFTEN DO YOU ATTEND NON-WORSHIP ACTIVITIES AT CHURCH?

■ WEEKLY OR MORE      ■ 1-3 TIMES A MONTH  
■ MANY OR A FEW TIMES A YEAR      ■ NEVER

FORMER CATHOLICS

46.91

CATHOLICS

26.85

OTHER

31.85

We know from other analyses of the full dataset (not shown here) that family makes a key difference in religious identity even when we control for other factors. In particular, regular talk about religion in the family and regular attendance at religious services as a family is very strongly and positively associated with emerging adults' later religious faith and practice, net of the influence of other factors. We also know that Catholic families do these things less than those of certain other faiths, such as evangelical Protestants, which is a significant reason why those groups tend better to "retain" their young people as emerging adults.

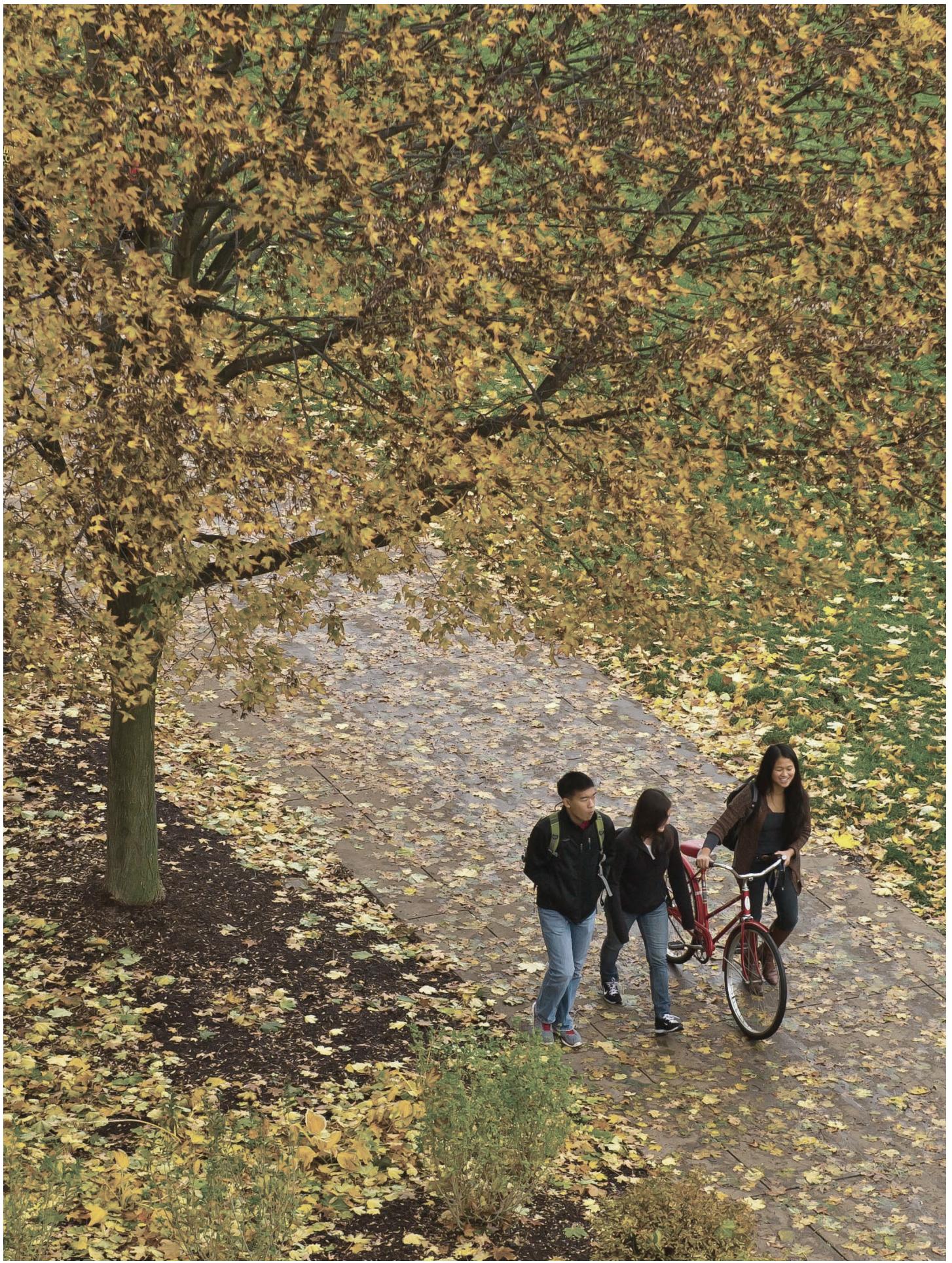
Parents' consistency and unity in their religious faith and practice also seems to have an effect on whether or not their teenagers hold onto their faith in emerging adulthood. Steven, the young man quoted earlier who sees religion as something "not healthy," had different and ever-shifting models of religion coming from his parents. His views were very similar to Joe's, discussed earlier, with whom he shares a similar mixed-faith

background. They were both raised by non-practicing Catholic fathers and mothers who had more intense, but also less stable religious lives. In Steven's case, his mother's religious instability has been unusually acute:

"My mom has always kind of played roulette with what organized religion she's gonna be this year. [She's] been Catholic, which she was raised as; Buddhist; uh, she's tried out Hinduism; and currently, she's part of a cult."

Recall that Steven made general claims about religion being appealing to those who need answers rather than those who are comfortable with questions. In his experience, such seems to be precisely the case, when comparing his mother's and father's approaches. Although his mother's involvement in a cult is an extreme example of this, his views are echoed in others' interviews, which suggests that the experience of those who grow up in a family of religious instability and multiple transitions through "legitimate" faiths is not fundamentally different from those whose parents become involved in more extreme or untraditional religious groups.

Steven and Joe, as well as Hannah and Brian who also came from religiously mixed and inconsistent families, may not even be aware of how much their parents have shaped their views about what draws people to religion. But our findings suggest that whether or not emerging adults are aware of it, they continue to understand and evaluate religion in reference to the models they were given growing up.



## 6.

### FORMER CATHOLICS TEND TO HAVE HAD LESS EMOTIONALLY CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR PARENTS.

Parents affect the religious identity of their children in other ways, especially through the quality of the relationships teens have with their parents.

It is not surprising that those teens who feel closer to their parents are more likely to adopt their religious faith, whether they are raised Catholic or in another tradition. But these findings

are a valuable reminder against the impression that the religious beliefs and practices of emerging adults are primarily shaped by influences outside of the family like media and peers.

These results also correct impressions that emerging adults' loss of faith is inevitable or random. It is not. Many emerging adults maintain a strong faith. But

those who do tend to have experienced a certain religious and social environment at home growing up, one in which faith was an active part of life and parents modeled religious involvement and stayed emotionally close to their children.

#### HOW CLOSE DO YOU FEEL TO YOUR FATHER?

■ EXTREMELY/VERY CLOSE      ■ FAIRLY/SOMEWHAT CLOSE  
■ NOT VERY/NOT AT ALL CLOSE

FORMER CATHOLICS

36.40

CATHOLICS

50.99

OTHER

40.74

**DESCRIPTION OF TABLES:**  
Description of tables: Sixty-three (63) percent of formerly Catholic emerging adults reported as teenagers feeling extremely or very close to their mother, compared to 71 percent of those who remained Catholic. Thirty-

six (36) percent of formerly Catholics emerging adults felt close to their fathers when they were teenagers, compared to 51 percent of current Catholics.

(Note: these questions referred to biological parents named in the first wave survey, when survey participants were teenagers; those who were estranged from or have lost parents were coded as "not at all close.")

## HOW CLOSE DO YOU FEEL TO YOUR MOTHER?

■ EXTREMELY/VERY CLOSE  
■ NOT VERY/NOT AT ALL CLOSE

■ FAIRLY/SOMEWHAT CLOSE

FORMER CATHOLICS

62.56

CATHOLICS

71.15

OTHER

63.52



# CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR FORMING COMMITTED CATHOLIC YOUTH

There are many ways to understand the development and role of religious faith and practice in people's lives, and the findings of this report provide only one perspective on the question. Yet numerous implications seem to follow the findings of this report.

Catholic adults who are interested in keeping children raised in the Church still connected to Catholic faith and practice into their 20s ought to note these facts:

## 1.

Leaving the Catholic Church rarely means becoming an atheist. Many former Catholics still believe in God or some other divine force, and about one-third of them still pray. This is not fundamentally different from emerging adults who are raised in other faiths. It demonstrates a widespread trend in this generation of moving away from organized religion but retaining a belief in and connection with the divine. These youth (and emerging adults) may be open to discussions about the

nature of God that are more sophisticated and inviting than some may imagine.

## 2.

The verities of Catholic Church teachings sit uncomfortably with most emerging adults today, who tend to be suspicious of what they view as narrow and rigid viewpoints. The effective formation of Catholic youth today need not obfuscate or compromise Church teachings, but will likely best convey them in an open, confident, exploratory, and dialogical mode.



### 3.

It makes a difference whether children have parents of the same religious faith or of mixed or changing religious faiths. Children with two committed Catholic parents are more likely to grow up to be committed Catholics themselves than those who feel split between different parents' religions. Although this again is true for those raised in many faiths, in our sample those raised Catholic are more likely to come from mixed-faith households.

### 4.

Most Catholic youth today are growing up in environments of major religious pluralism, which can make them hesitate to make strong religious commitments themselves. Catholic youth need to be shown how they can simultaneously seriously believe, practice, and profess their own faith while appropriately respecting and honoring the faith of others who are different.

### 5.

Many Catholic youth, like their peers, have been convinced that religious faith and modern science are locked in an inevitable war in which science always wins. The Church will remove

unnecessary obstacles to adult faith by better teaching youth that faith and reason, revelation and science are compatible and potentially mutually reinforcing.

### 6.

Emotional closeness between Catholic parents and their teenage children—especially with fathers— influences whether teens remain Catholic into their 20s. Greater relational distance between parents and teens increases the chance that the latter will leave the Church in emerging adulthood.

### 7.

Young Catholics whose parents regularly attend Mass, are involved in their parishes, and who talk with their children about religious faith are more likely to remain Catholic themselves, compared to those whose parents are less involved in Church and who talk less about religious matters. Again, these effects of parents' practices are visible across many different groups, but what makes the Catholics distinct is that their parents have been less likely to engage as heavily and consistently in these practices. The difference between having nominal and actively practicing parents is a significant one in the lives

of Catholic versus former Catholic emerging adults. The Church can potentially engage with this issue by encouraging parents to adopt consistent small habits expressing faith, and making religious practice a fixture in the everyday life of the family.

## NOTES:

All data used in this report are from the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR). This is a longitudinal panel study, following a representative sample of American adolescents from their preteens into their young adult years. All statistics are based on the sample of 2,144 who responded to both the initial survey at wave 1 in 2002–2003 and the wave 4 follow-up survey in 2013. More information is available at [youthandreligion.nd.edu](http://youthandreligion.nd.edu). The study was funded by a generous grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.

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