

# The Migrant Spirit: Motivations, Challenges and Joys of Disaffiliated Filipino Catholics

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**ABSTRACT.** As young Filipino adults increasingly leave the Catholic Church for charismatic and evangelical communities, this study explored their motivations for departure and their subsequent transition experiences. Utilizing a qualitative design with semi-structured interviews and recursive textual analysis, the research identified four primary drivers: persistent invitations from other denominations, limited prior Catholic engagement, a strong search for belonging, and dissatisfaction with homilies. Although participants encountered challenges such as doctrinal confusion and strained relationships, they reported a renewed passion for Scripture and deep spiritual fulfillment in their new faiths. These insights underscore the urgent need for the Church to enhance spiritual formation, liturgical quality, and community fellowship. Consequently, the study recommends implementing dynamic, Scripture-based youth initiatives to better address spiritual needs, guide responsive formation programs, and ultimately foster interfaith harmony.

## 1.0. Introduction

The Catholic Church, often cited as the world's longest-enduring institution, boasts over 1.3 billion members globally. However, it faces significant challenges to its authority while striving to adapt its policies (Reardon, 2019). A primary concern is the migration of members to other faiths. In Northwestern Europe, for instance, young people report weakened confidence in the Church (Slattery, 2019). Turpin (2020) further reveals that Irish ex-Catholics do not merely leave the Church but actively reject what they perceive as "inauthentic" cultural Catholicism. Similarly, Pew Research Center data indicates that in America, departures from the Church outpace conversions into it (Sammons, 2025). Consequently, the future presents challenges as young adults increasingly show disinterest in Catholicism (Lowney, 2017).

The Catholic Church in Asia faces similar difficulties in adapting to a changing world and connecting with younger generations. One specific issue is the rise of Protestant megachurches. Pentecostalism, in particular, has seen a numerical increase through the spread of

house churches, especially in China (Au, 2020). Nazarudin (2021) notes that new Protestant and independent churches flourished in the region between 1970 and 2020. Although the exact number of independent churches is unknown, Chong (2019) asserts that the growth of Asian Christianity is driven more by Protestant or Pentecostal groups than by Catholic communities. Therefore, effectively accompanying young people remains a continuous challenge; the Church must commit to their pastoral care and spiritual formation to inspire an authentic Christian life (Meroni, 2018).

Despite being a predominantly Catholic nation with over 85 million faithful (Agoncillo, 2021), the Philippines is witnessing the proliferation of other religious movements. Young people are increasingly finding personal meaning in charismatic movements and evangelical churches (Del Castillo et al., 2020). Although the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) issued a 2012 pastoral exhortation calling for a "new evangelization" to reignite the fervor of Filipino Catholics and integrate the Gospel into their lives (Basas, 2019), other Christian denominations continue to attract a considerable number of Catholics (Cornelio, 2021). The widespread presence of non-Catholic schools and churches allows Filipinos to

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practice diverse faiths openly, contributing to the continued growth of Evangelical and Protestant communities (Garcia, 2019).

This trend is evident within a specific diocese in the Negros Island Region, which holds jurisdiction over 1,178,000 Catholics (Catholic Directory, 2020). While the Diocesan Commission on Youth records over a thousand active youth leaders, a shift is observable. Young people are increasingly engaging with non-Catholic groups, with students in both public and private schools attracted to Christ-centered ministries. Religious education teachers have observed that many Catholic youths are disengaging from the Church to affiliate with other denominations.

Reviewing the literature, it is evident that most local studies have focused on Catholic youth's attitudes toward the Church (Abun et al., 2020), the religious identity of adolescents (Liamzon & Banzon, 2025), the outlook of religious organizations (Lituañas, 2021), and spiritual experiences (Mañez & Yabut, 2022). Notably, there is a scarcity of research investigating the specific motivations of former Catholics for leaving the Church. Furthermore, there is limited qualitative literature regarding disaffiliated Catholics in the country. This study aims to bridge this research gap.

Hence, this qualitative study was undertaken to explore the reasons and experiences related to the departure of disaffiliated Catholics from the Church in a diocese in the Negros Island Region. The findings of this study serve as a basis for improving educational materials in Religious Education, particularly concerning Basic Catholic Doctrine, Church History, and Ecclesiology.

## 2.0. Methodology

*Research Design.* This study employed a basic qualitative research design to investigate the experiences and motivations of disaffiliated Catholics and the reasons behind their departure from the Catholic Church. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research explores and understands the meaning attributed by individuals or groups to a social or human problem. It is a methodology that concentrates on investigating and comprehending complex phenomena and the meanings ascribed to them by individuals or groups (Jain, 2021). Grounded in methods of observation and inquiry, this design utilizes tools such as interviews, focus groups, or observations to gather rich, descriptive information. Therefore, this design is appropriate for delving into the experiences of emerging adults to understand their motivations for leaving the Church, as well as the difficulties and joys experienced after transferring to other faith communities.

*Participants and Sampling Technique.* The participants of the study were emerging adults from a

diocese in Negros Island, selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling is the deliberate selection of participants based on their adeptness in explaining a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon (Robinson, 2024); it is also known as judgment, selective, or subjective sampling (Crossman, 2020). Additionally, snowball sampling was employed, where existing participants recommended others they knew to participate (Hossan et al., 2023). Guided by the inclusion criteria, the participants consisted of former Catholics who had left the Church for at least five (5) years, transferred to another Christian denomination, were emerging adults aged 18-25 at the time of leaving, and currently reside within the diocese where the study was conducted.

*Research Instrument.* Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is a data collection method that relies on asking questions within a decided framework (George, 2022). According to Ruslin et al. (2022), this format is more effective than other types because it permits researchers to obtain in-depth information and evidence without losing the study's focus. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to stay on track while enabling participants to respond freely and relate experiences in their own words. Furthermore, the researcher gathered additional depth using follow-up queries derived from the pre-determined questions.

*Data Collection and Analysis.* Data collection involved semi-structured, individual, face-to-face, and in-depth interviews. Guided by the interview protocol, the researcher explained the study's purpose, duration, approach, content, confidentiality measures, and data usage to the participants. Once rapport was established, participants were given the opportunity to clarify points before signing the written informed consent. All interviews were conducted privately. With the participant's approval, audio recording was employed, and they were instructed to speak in their preferred language. Probes were used whenever necessary, as the use of probes is imperative in drawing rich and deep data from participants (Robinson, 2023). The researcher also practiced "mind bracketing"—suspending judgment and setting aside personal biases—to facilitate open sharing. Interviews lasted between forty (40) minutes to one (1) hour, ending with a debriefing and expression of gratitude.

For data analysis, the researcher used recursive textual analysis to extract the motivations and experiences of the participants. To achieve an in-depth understanding, Lichtman's (2013) "3 Cs"—coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing—were utilized. Initial codes were generated from responses, then revisited, modified, renamed, and organized into categories. Key concepts were subsequently identified to signify the

meaning attached to the data. To ensure credibility, the researcher utilized member checking to confirm that participants' experiences were accurately described. An external auditor, expert in qualitative methodology, was also engaged to review the research process.

*Ethical Considerations.* The researcher observed ethical norms regarding the protection of participants, respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, ensuring the ethical trustworthiness of the study in line with guidelines established by the Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (PHREB). The welfare of participants was prioritized by ensuring voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw at any time. Participants were provided with an informed consent form confirming their understanding and willingness to participate. The researcher ensured privacy by adhering to the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and using fictitious names for identity protection. To maintain confidentiality, all raw data were securely stored and subsequently disposed of properly.

### 3.0. Results

#### The Participants

*Gian* is a 25-year-old female from La Carlota City, Negros Occidental, and a graduate of a Catholic university. Although baptized as a Catholic, she transferred to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), also known as the Mormons, after missionaries invited her to join at the age of 17. She decided to be baptized into the LDS church a year later and has been an active member since. During the interview, she was very open and enthusiastic, stating she was happy to share her experiences as a member of the LDS.

*Jun*, a 23-year-old Agriculturist, hails from a barangay in an urbanized city in Negros. He transferred from the Catholic Church to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) after missionaries visited his home several times. He decided to be baptized into the LDS church at age 19. Although he is a shy person of few words, he answered the questions openly and sincerely. Jun shared that he aspires to become an LDS missionary someday, inspired by their work and his desire to share his knowledge of the Gospel with others.

*Mina* is a 23-year-old active member of the Jesus the Master Builder Baptist Church in a city in Negros Occidental. Formerly a choir member in the Catholic Church, she transferred to the Baptist Church at age 16 and was baptized two years later. Mina is a passionate individual, especially regarding the Word of God. Her enthusiasm and interest in sharing her experiences during the interview inspired the researcher to pursue the study and broaden its scope.

*Cami*, a teacher by profession, was the fourth participant interviewed. She hails from a town in Negros Occidental and has been a Born-Again Christian for nearly eight years. She left the Catholic Church at the age of 17 and decided to be baptized in her new church a year later. During the interview, she spoke with confidence, noting that while she used to be shy, her new community helped her develop the self-confidence and bearing of a mature, strong individual.

*Luna* is an HRM graduate from a Catholic school who lives in a semi-urban community in Negros Occidental. She transferred to the Church of Christ at age 18 and has been actively involved for six years. Her noble dream is to serve the Lord by sharing the Good News, especially with her fellow youth. During the interview, Luna was constantly smiling, indicating her happiness in sharing her experience. It was evident that she loves her family deeply; despite their modest living conditions, she remains steadfast in her faith, hopeful that the Lord will sustain them.

*Bin*, 25, is an Engineering graduate from a state university in Negros Occidental who is currently preparing for employment abroad. Coming from a devoted Catholic family in southern Negros, he previously served as a choir master at the Catholic school where he finished high school. However, during college, he transferred to a Born-Again Christian community after being invited by his sister and friends. Bin displayed openness, interest, and a happy disposition during the interview, evidently enjoying the opportunity to share his experiences.

*Shairen* is a member of the Bacolod City Alliance Church and a resident of a city in Southern Negros. Originally baptized Catholic, she transferred to her new church at age 18. She recently graduated with a degree in Management. Although initially reserved, she gradually opened up as the interview progressed. She eagerly shared her love for the Word of God and her passion for teaching the Bible to children. As a youth leader in her new church, she has come to recognize her potential and worth as a person.

*Mikki* joined the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church when she was 17 years old. She decided to be baptized after a year of observing and learning the doctrines and practices of the SDA. Her enjoyment of singing praise and worship songs was a primary reason for leaving the Catholic Church. Throughout the interview, she displayed a jolly disposition, making the interaction enjoyable for both the participant and the researcher. She showed willingness and enthusiasm in sharing her experiences and considers herself an instrument of God in spreading the Good News.

*Ryan*, 24, is a Financial Management graduate originally from Mindanao who has lived on Negros Island for ten years. A former baptized Catholic, he

joined the Baptist Church at age 18. He joined his church's music ministry because of his love for singing and playing in a band. During the interview, he was initially shy and hesitant but gradually opened up, answering questions with interest. It was observable that he loves reading the Bible and is eager to share his knowledge of the Word of God.

*Jelly* is a 23-year-old student from a city in Negros Occidental. She was a baptized Catholic but decided to transfer to a Born-Again Christian community at age 18, a year after a friend invited her. Although most of her relatives are Catholic, this did not hinder her from becoming an active member of her new church, where she currently serves as a youth leader in charge of Bible study for kids. *Jelly* remained smiling throughout the interview, demonstrating her happiness and fulfillment as a Born-Again Christian.

*Helen* is a 24-year-old nurse from a municipality in Northern Negros. She was a baptized Catholic but decided to join the Green Pastures Church at age 18. She is a friendly person who loves her family deeply, and her happy disposition is inspiring to those around her. Despite the evident tiredness she felt at the time, she showed her bright side during the interview. Her honest and enthusiastic answers provided the researcher with reliable information.

*Yong* was the final participant interviewed. She hails from a city in Negros Occidental and is currently pursuing a Nursing degree. She was a baptized Catholic until she decided to join the Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) at age 18. Despite her mother's desire for her to return to the Catholic Church, she is determined to remain an INC member after learning their doctrines and practices. Although initially shy, she showed openness and eagerness in answering the questions, providing responses that were valuable for the completion of the study.

### Thematic Insights

Following the interviews with the twelve (12) participants, the researcher transcribed the responses verbatim. The data were then analyzed thematically, grouping similar ideas and insights into four (4) primary themes and eight (8) sub-themes.

The first theme highlights the underlying motivations contributing to the participants' disaffiliation from the Catholic Church. These include the persuasive strategies and proactive outreach employed by other religious denominations, the participants' limited prior involvement in Catholic activities, the welcoming environment of alternative faith communities, and dissatisfaction with homilies. The second theme addresses the challenges encountered by participants, such as confusion arising from doctrinal inconsistencies and the emotional impact of losing Catholic friends. The

third theme centers on the positive experiences and spiritual fulfillment reported after affiliating with new groups, specifically the dynamic nature of worship services, fellowship activities grounded in scripture, and a heightened sense of purpose. Interestingly, a divergent theme emerged reflecting a unique perspective: the expressed desire of one individual to return to the Catholic Church.

### Motivations contributing to disaffiliation from the Catholic faith

Participants cited several factors regarding their departure from the Catholic Church. The process often began with a casual invitation from a friend or relative, followed by consistent follow-up and frequent visits from church leaders. Many independent churches displayed strong enthusiasm for attracting new members through various activities. Former Catholics who were previously less engaged in Church activities were often drawn to these communities, where they experienced a greater sense of belonging and acceptance.

*Compelling invitations and diligent follow-up.* One of the primary reasons for transitioning to other denominations was the proactive approach of older members. This included home visits to share teachings and continuous encouragement to engage in church activities. These efforts were reinforced by constant reminders to join Bible study sessions, worship services, and youth gatherings:

One thing that motivated me to leave the Catholic Church and join the Latter-Day Saints is the way the missionaries explained their doctrines to us. They would always come to the house and explain to us about God. (Gian, Personal Communication, January 11, 2024).

My friends invited me to join the Bible study of their church. They would also always invite me to go with them to their Bible study. (Mina, Personal Communication, January 24, 2024)

Our Church leaders really make it a point to visit the members, and us youth, they really encourage us to go to church. (Shairen, Personal Communication, May 4, 2024)

*Nominal participation in the Catholic Church.* Most of the participants classified themselves as nominal Catholics. This means that they occasionally participate in Sunday Mass but are not actively engaged in parish life or other church events. As a result, they are easily drawn to worship services of other faiths where they feel more engaged and experience a stronger sense of community.

Since I wasn't very active in the Catholic Church, I went with my friend to the Baptist church when she invited me. (Mina, Personal Communication, January 24, 2024)

I would attend some activities too, Miss, like Flores de Mayo and during Holy Week, but it felt lacking, Miss, because I didn't have much participation. I would just sit and listen because there was no interaction. (Jelly, Personal Communication, July 18, 2024)

Because before in the Catholic Church, I would just go to church, listen, then go home; it was like I didn't have much participation. (Yong, Personal Communication, April 22, 2024)

*Feeling of acceptance and warmth.* The participants shared that being accepted and appreciated is a significant factor for them to move to different faith communities. The availability of engaging activities specifically designed for the youth, the welcoming atmosphere and the opportunity to make new friendships also played a role in their decision to switch to other denominations.

Even though I didn't really understand much of their teaching at first, I was really happy because they welcomed us so warmly, even though we were just new. I was really amazed at how they welcomed me. (Ryan, Personal Communication, June 29, 2024)

The people in our new Church are very welcoming. When I'm in church, it feels like we're all a big family. (Luna, Personal Communication, February 22, 2024)

I am very thankful because I experienced being welcomed by the members of Born-again community. I gained a lot of true friends. (Cami, Personal Communication, February 8, 2024)

*Unengaging homilies.* Among the numerous factors cited, one participant identified a key motivating factor for transferring to other denominations, related to the uninspiring homilies delivered by priests, which were perceived as lacking relevance and connection to the lived experiences of the congregation. Homilies delivered without passion are deemed by the participant as boring and tiring. In contrast, the dynamic and enthusiastic preaching style of pastors in other faith groups was seen as more attractive to new members, particularly among the youth.

I just want to be honest. Because in Catholic Mass, Miss, I would get sleepy, and when the

priest would give his homily, it was really sleep-inducing. But in the Born-Again service, Miss, the energy is intense, I really don't get sleepy. (Helen, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024)

Because at that time, Miss, of course, you know how teenagers are, teenagers easily get bored. The way the priest would give his homily, I would easily get bored, Miss. And I wouldn't get inspired by their homily. (Helen, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024)

I'm really sorry, Miss, because, you know, I was a teenager at that time, I would easily get bored, Miss, easily get tired of things. I really got bored with homilies. It was like I just couldn't bring myself to listen. (Helen, Personal Communication, April 25, 2024)

### **Difficulties adjusting to life after leaving the Catholic faith**

As noted by the participants, transitioning from the Catholic Church to another faith denomination can be a challenging experience. They faced obstacles while moving from one religious community to another. These challenges included confusion regarding the differing doctrines, teachings, and practices. They also mentioned that they found themselves disconnected from their former Catholic friends.

*Grappling with doctrinal inconsistencies.* The participants shared their feelings of confusion as they encountered conflicting beliefs and practices, ones they had grown up with as Catholics as opposed to the new teachings they were being introduced to. Key areas of difference included varying interpretations of the Bible and practices such as making the sign of the cross and praying to saints.

I'm also getting used to not making the sign of the cross, not praying to saints. I'm still a bit confused about the doctrines because what I learned in Catholicism is different. (Bin, Personal Communication, April 15, 2024)

I felt new because the church didn't have a cross; I was used to Catholic churches having one, so it was initially different in terms of the place and the structure of the church. Then, in following the worship service, in Iglesia there's a lot of singing, which felt new to me because there's no communion, no statues of saints. (Yong, Personal Communication, April 22, 2024)

So, there was also confusion for me, Miss, initially, whether I wanted to go back to Catholic or stay as Born Again. Because I got

confused by the teachings. (Helen, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024)

*Loss of Catholic friends.* For the participants, differing beliefs and religious practices also played a role in drifting apart from their former Catholic friends. While the initial separation and feelings of rejection were painful, they gradually came to accept it. Building new relationships with fellow youth members in their new church became a keyway for them to cope with the loss caused by differences in faith perspectives.

I felt a bit bad at first, Miss, because my former friends from the Catholic Church seemed to ignore me. I really felt that their treatment of me was different. (Mina, Personal Communication, January 24, 2024)

Then I found it difficult to be with my old friends from the Catholic Church because it seemed like they didn't communicate with me much anymore since my religion was different. (Luna, Personal Communication, February 22, 2024)

Probably, Miss, because we no longer go to the same church, uhmm, we rarely hang out together anymore; my communication with them has been cut off. (Ryan, Personal Communication, May 21, 2024)

### **Finding community and fulfillment in new faith groups**

A sense of joy and fulfillment was echoed by the participants as they shared their positive experiences within their new faith communities. Regular involvement in worship services and fellowship gatherings helped them form bonds with fellow believers and feel the presence of God more profoundly. A key factor in this connection is the central role the Bible plays in all their activities.

*Engaging worship and fellowship rooted in Scriptures.* The participants shared that one of the most significant sources of joy in their new church communities is the vibrant worship and fellowship rooted in the Sacred Scriptures. Participants especially appreciated the pastors' sermons centered on the Word of God, as well as Scripture-based activities such as Bible studies, devotionals, and personal reflections.

But in the Baptist church, the Word of God is really explained thoroughly. That's why my heart is so full because of the pastor's sermons. (Mina, Personal Communication, January 24, 2024)

We are also taught that the Bible is the truth. When the pastors preach, it's always really connected to the Bible. What they talk about is always about the Bible. (Luna, Personal Communication, February 22, 2024)

I enjoyed the worship, singing, and the pastor's sermon, which is mostly taken from the Bible and related to what is happening in our lives and in our surroundings. (Helen, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024)

*Finding meaning and fulfillment through personal growth.* The participants expressed a deep sense of joy in discovering a welcoming space within their new faith communities, one where they felt genuinely valued and trusted. Being entrusted with roles and responsibilities, even at a young age, affirmed their sense of self-worth and provided meaningful opportunities for personal growth. Their active involvement in various ministry activities fostered a profound sense of purpose and belonging.

I am happy now in the LDS Church because I've discovered that I have many talents and skills. (Gian, Personal Communication, February 15, 2024)

During training and youth camps, we were made to speak in front of other members. Here my confidence grew because my shyness gradually disappeared. (Jun, Personal Communication, January 19, 2024)

One of my most joyful experiences, Miss, is my growth as a Christian in the Alliance Church. I became a youth leader, and I share about the Gospel, especially with my fellow youth. This is where I really grew, Miss, as a person and as a Christian. Every week we meet, Miss, for Bible study, and I also teach the children about the Bible. (Shairene, Personal Communication, May 4, 2024)

### **Reflecting on rejoining the Catholic Church**

One heartfelt experience shared by a participant is the desire to reconnect with the Catholic Church. The richness of Catholic tradition, particularly the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist, emerged as a compelling reason for coming back. This longing is accompanied by discernment and reflection, as the participant seeks ought direction regarding a possible return to the Church.

If my Catholic friends invite me, I go with them. I still light candles in the Cathedral, Miss. I also go with my family if they ask me to attend Catholic Mass. (Helen, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024)

Yes, Miss, I continue to discern whether to stay or go back to the Catholic Church. (Helen, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024)

Actually, Miss, I really consider until now the possibility of going back to the Catholic Church. (Helen, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024)

#### 4.0. Discussion

##### Motivations contributing to disaffiliation from the catholic faith

From the participants' perspectives, disaffiliation resulted from a confluence of personal, social, and spiritual factors. Primary drivers for leaving the Catholic Church included the persuasive invitations and proactive follow-up strategies of other religious denominations, a perceived lack of meaningful engagement among the Catholic faithful, and the welcoming atmosphere found in new faith communities. Literature supports these findings; Beeson (2021) notes that individuals often leave when they perceive the Church has strayed from the Gospel or core theological principles. Additionally, family transitions and the influence of family members are significant factors in Roman Catholics leaving the Church (Berghammer et al., 2017). Broader elements such as a sense of belonging, the social environment, belief systems, and identity also contribute to the decision to disaffiliate (Riegel et al., 2022).

The proactive outreach and consistent follow-up efforts by other faith groups proved instrumental in encouraging young Catholics to engage with new communities, participate in events, and explore doctrinal teachings. These compelling approaches successfully drew the interest of potential converts, prompting attendance at worship services and religious activities. This trend presents a significant challenge for the Catholic Church in retaining younger members, as contemporary youth are increasingly drawn to authentic, intimate, and purposeful relationships (Fritz, 2023). Consequently, they are more responsive to personal invitations from individuals who demonstrate genuine concern for their spiritual development. The active presence of young people is essential, as their participation is critical to the vitality and sustainability of the faith community; indeed, youth engagement contributes to the continuity, growth, and overall development of the Church (Amankwa & Awuku-Gyampoh, 2022).

Furthermore, nominal participation—characterized by irregular attendance, lack of sacramental reception, and limited involvement—remains a longstanding issue within the Christian tradition and the Catholic Church

specifically. Often, nominal Catholics are attracted to other faith communities by their lively worship services and fellowship. Lim (2018) notes that nominal Christianity is an ongoing challenge for the Roman Catholic Church, particularly within the Philippine context. To address this, renewal movements within the Church are critical for fostering authentic discipleship and encouraging a meaningful daily relationship with God. Hellemans (2015) contends that because traditional religious expressions have diminished in their capacity to engage the contemporary faithful, the Catholic Church must articulate a renewed and contextually relevant religious offering to reestablish connections with the broader populace.

A deep sense of acceptance and belonging also significantly influenced former Catholics to transition to other faith communities. A supportive and affirming ecclesial environment allows individuals to feel recognized and valued, which enhances participation, promotes a positive church culture, and strengthens commitment. Parish priests play a key role in fostering this belonging, not only through the liturgy but by sharing an inspiring vision, encouraging teamwork, and helping parishioners use their gifts for service (Dixon & Arunachalam, 2018). Membership is rooted in building strong relationships within a supportive community. Hartzer (2024) highlights that young people, in particular, thrive when surrounded by caring groups, such as families and church communities, that provide support and guidance.

Finally, the quality of preaching is a crucial factor; many young Catholics are drawn to other communities by sermons that are scripturally focused, passionate, and clear. While the Catholic faithful generally approach the homily with a desire for spiritual insight, there is a recurring concern that the quality of sermons often fails to meet expectations. Sławiński (2024) emphasizes that the remedy lies in diligent and thoughtful preparation. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis underscores the importance of delivering concise, relevant, and accessible homilies, advising preachers to speak in a language that resonates with the faithful to foster better engagement (Šuráb, 2022). Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the preacher to share the Word of God with hope and encouragement (Awbrey, 2022).

##### Difficulties adjusting to life after leaving the Catholic faith

Former Catholics who transfer to other denominations often encounter feelings of loss, grief, and disorientation as they attempt to adapt to unfamiliar worship environments and community dynamics. During this period of transition, the support and acceptance offered by the newly embraced faith community play a vital role in facilitating emotional

adjustment and spiritual stability. In this spirit of community, the encyclical of Pope Francis (2020) highlights the significance of fraternity and social friendship, calling on everyone to collaborate in creating a more just and compassionate world.

Navigating the differences between Catholic teachings and those of other religious traditions can be a difficult and confusing journey. These differences often stem from various influences, including the interpretation of Sacred Scripture and the complex nature of religious doctrine itself. Compounding this challenge, Bruce (2018) notes that young Catholics often find it difficult to express the fundamental teachings of their faith, as their parents are frequently unable to introduce them to basic Church doctrines. This trend points to a growing need for the Catholic Church to reevaluate how its teachings are communicated and to seek more effective ways of engaging with younger generations, particularly considering the selective adherence to Church principles (Aguilar et al., 2024). In these moments, patience, compassion, and open dialogue are essential to foster understanding and spiritual growth.

Given these challenges, Catholic schools act as agents of evangelization and are enjoined to provide quality Christian education that includes non-Catholic students within an atmosphere of welcome and respect. This approach is supported by Pope John Paul II, who stated that ecumenical responsibility in the Church requires solidarity with the world (Malacao & Del Castillo, 2021). Moreover, Catholic schools are challenged to reflect on their function as venues for transmitting the essential doctrines and traditions of the Church. Affirming this, Pedrosa & Madrigal (2021) mention that one of the important functions of a Catholic school is to develop a Christian community and nurture the Christian life of the academic community.

Furthermore, religious beliefs play a significant role in influencing social attitudes, values, and behaviors, thereby shaping individual beliefs and societal norms (Rashid, 2023). When friendships are affected by differences in religious beliefs, the loss can feel especially painful; however, it may also serve as a moment for personal and spiritual growth. Embracing the fact that others will inevitably hold different beliefs is a vital mindset for young people to develop (Sun, 2016). Throughout his papacy, Pope John Paul II consistently promoted interreligious dialogue and ecumenism, underscoring the importance of mutual understanding and collaboration with non-Catholic communities (Blakemore, 2025). Therefore, while Catholic schools are entrusted to safeguard the doctrines of the faith, they must also remain open to other Christian traditions. As prompted by the Congregation for Catholic Education, Catholic schools are directed to

be venues for sincere intercultural dialogue that is open to renewed thinking yet grounded in tradition (Franchi, 2024).

### **Finding community and fulfillment in new faith groups**

The new faith communities found by disaffiliated Catholics often serve as welcoming spaces where they can journey alongside others who share similar beliefs, fostering a spirit of unity and fellowship. Highlighting this shift, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life notes that over 15 million former Catholics in the United States now attend Protestant Churches (Allison & Castaldo, 2016). Some Catholics leave the Church for Protestant denominations, asserting that these communities do an excellent job of conveying the Word of God in the light of present realities (Squires, 2021). These circumstances challenge the Catholic Church to create a warm, welcoming space that supports the well-being of its members, especially young people.

Many individuals are searching for a sense of belonging and meaningful relationships, a desire that often leads them to seek something bigger than themselves. Research indicates that a sense of belonging is enhanced by religious community involvement (Michaels et al., 2022). Other studies suggest that religion provides a vital path to finding meaning and purpose in life, as well as maintaining a positive state of mind (Papaleontiou-Louca, 2021). Being active in a faith community can help people stay emotionally strong during tough times and provide a sense of stability.

One of the great sources of joy for many disaffiliated Catholics in their new church communities is dynamic worship and rich fellowship centered on Sacred Scripture. This worship is marked by active engagement with the Word of God, heartfelt prayer, and praise through music, creating an atmosphere of spiritual renewal and connection that fascinates young people. The Bible is considered sacred because it contains messages from God (Montang et al., 2023). Young people who engage in reading the Bible to a larger extent are more likely to become faithful adults; indeed, reading the Word of God leads young people to grow up not only as good Christians but also as excellent Catholics (Kawama, 2024).

Consequently, young people are increasingly drawn to independent, Bible-centered churches because they desire a deeper understanding of their faith. They are often attracted to communities that provide strong biblical teaching and thoughtful scriptural interpretation. As Davies (2023) points out, nearly half of the people in Western countries believe that the Bible has something meaningful to say about life today. Herman and Hindradjat (2024) likewise emphasize that effective church-based counseling relies on consistent prayer,



dependence on the Holy Spirit, and a foundation in Scripture.

While many young people are drawn to Bible-based denominations, it is important to remember that the Catholic Church is also deeply grounded in Sacred Scripture. The celebration of the Holy Eucharist is rich in biblical content, with the Word of God woven throughout the entire liturgy. As stated in the Church document *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Sacred Scripture is of vital significance in the celebration of the liturgy (Marquis, 2023). Likewise, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, highlights that the Church holds both Scripture and Sacred Tradition as the highest authority for faith, describing the Word of God as “the soul of sacred theology” (Kljajić, 2024). The challenge, therefore, lies in developing Bible-based activities that actively engage young Catholics and help them grow in their appreciation of the Scriptures.

Furthermore, finding fulfillment in one’s faith journey is characterized by deep happiness, contentment, and a clear sense of purpose, often rooted in serving the community. A study by Edie (2021) found that the experience of joy is a significant aspect of the Christian life for adolescents and young adults. As Finley (2023) affirms, Catholicism holds a profound capacity for Christian joy—a joy rooted in faith and a deep, loving relationship with God.

Ultimately, it is evident that intellectual arguments alone are not enough to bring young people back to the Catholic Church. Rather, the focus should shift toward renewing the Church through the creation of vibrant, joyful communities that inspire belonging and commitment (Ballard, 2023). This includes a call for Catholic schools to promote diversity and inclusivity through activities that improve the academic, social, and emotional well-being of students from varied faith traditions (Obhoo et al., 2024).

### Reflecting on Rejoining the Catholic Church

Rejoining the Catholic Church is often a deeply personal spiritual journey, shaped by questions, longing, and a search for belonging. For many, the decision to return follows a period of absence marked by changes in life, spiritual exploration, or doubt. Yet, much like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, the Church stands with open arms, ready to welcome back those seeking to reconnect with their faith. This invitation is critical given current trends: a study on young adults revealed that many cease identifying as Catholic as early as age 13, long before they stop attending their parish. Furthermore, while the number of people leaving is increasing, very few express a desire to return (Smith, 2018).

Despite these challenges, those who were previously baptized but have been always welcome. The

One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church stands ready to guide them on their journey home. This reflection explores both why former Catholics choose to return and how the Church can remain a sacred space of welcome, joy, and profound spiritual encounter. Addressing this is vital, for the Church cannot experience true renewal while her young people remain uninspired (Fritz, 2018).

### 5.0. Conclusion

This study examined the motivations, difficulties, and joys experienced by former Catholics who have joined other faith denominations. The insights gathered from the participants highlight important aspects for pastoral reflection within the Church, such as the need for more intentional spiritual formation for young people, the enhancement of liturgical experiences to ensure deeper engagement, the fostering of dynamic community fellowship, and the implementation of Scripture-based initiatives that promote both individual and communal spiritual development. Moreover, the insights will provide opportunity for Catholic schools to reflect on its role of providing spaces for students of different traditions to express and celebrate their faith.

### 6.0. Limitations of the Findings

A key limitation of this study lies in its narrow scope and small sample size, consisting of only twelve disaffiliated Catholic emerging adults. Consequently, the findings cannot be widely generalized and may not capture the full diversity of experiences, backgrounds, and motivations that characterize the broader population of disaffiliated Catholics. The study offers helpful insights, but it does not fully show the wide range of experiences and reasons people may have for leaving the Church.

### 7.0. Practical Value of the Paper

This study provides meaningful insights into the reasons former Catholics chose to leave the Church and become part of other faith communities. By understanding their experiences, the Church can better respond to the pastoral needs of the young people by developing initiatives that encourage unity and support respectful, harmonious relationships across diverse faith expressions. These findings can also help Catholic schools design formation programs for young people that are carefully and intentionally integrated into the Religious Education and Campus Ministry programs. Catholic schools can create space for interreligious dialogues where students can share their faith experiences, encouraging interactions between students of varied faith denominations and affording occasions for ecumenical prayer and worship without compromising the authentic doctrines and traditions of the Catholic faith.

## 8.0. Directions for Future Research

This qualitative research may be further developed through a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to achieve a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject under study. Expanding the pool of participants to include a broader and more diverse demographic could also enrich the findings by capturing a wider range of perspectives. Future research may also investigate the experiences of former Catholics who, after joining other faith communities, eventually returned to the Catholic Church. Additionally, exploring the journeys of non-Catholics who have converted to Catholicism presents a compelling avenue for further scholarly inquiry.

## 9.0. Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The researchers declare that no competing interests exist. No financial or personal relationships have influenced the content or findings of this work.

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