Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 42 *After 50 Years: The Living Spirit of Vatican II*

Article 23

9-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Gillis, Chester (2012) "Reports: Failed Marriages, Poor Catechesis, Sex Scandal, Unmet Spiritual Needs: The Exodus of Americans From the Catholic Church," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 42, Article 23.
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol42/iss1/23

Failed marriages, poor catechesis, sex scandal, unmet spiritual needs The Exodus of Americans from the Catholic Church

By Chester Gillis

Each year thousands of people join the Catholic Church through their participation in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Most Catholics have never attended the Easter Vigil ceremony at which these new members are welcomed into the church. For those who do attend, it is a rich liturgy in which the RCIA candidates play a significant role. Most parishes receive candidates into the church through this elaborate ritual; for those who participate in, or at least are aware of, this ceremony, it must look as though the church is growing. According to the Pew Forum, 2.6 percent of the adult population (about 6 million Catholics) is composed of converts. However, this growth is offset by 10.1 percent (about 23 million) who have left their childhood affiliation with the Catholic Church. Thus, the number of Catholics is definitely not growing and, without immigration, would be declining sharply. About 45 percent of those who leave join Protestant churches, and 45 percent remain unaffiliated. The other 10 percent join a non-Christian religion.

The Official Catholic Directory reports that between 2005 and 2011 the number of Catholics grew from 64.8 to 65.4 million (an increase of 600,000, or less than .01 percent). But the Catholic population is not growing at the same pace as the general population in America, which rose from 296 million in 2005 to 310 million in 2011 (a growth rate of approximately 5 percent). The 2007 Pew Forum Survey indicated that there are 22 million ex-Catholics in America, a group that is larger than the Southern Baptists, the Methodists, or the Mormons. In fact, this part of the population could be considered the third largest "denomination" behind Catholics and all Baptists. According to the 2008 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, while nearly one in three Americans (31 percent) was raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one in four (23 percent) describe themselves as Catholic.

In the past 10 years the church has lost 1,359 parishes (7.1 percent of the national total), many of these in the Northeast and Midwest, victims of demographic changes and unsustainable infrastructure. At the same time, new and larger churches are being built in locations to which people have migrated in either the suburbs or the sunshine states. With fewer priests there will be fewer, but larger, churches.

Forty percent of Catholics are age 50 or older. Two-thirds who leave the church do so before they are 24 years old, so the next generation of Catholics is shrinking. Immigration, mostly Hispanic, has helped to bolster the absolute number of Catholics, but second- and third-generation Hispanic Catholics are also leaving, usually to join Pentecostal Christian churches. According to the Pew Forum, Latinos, who number one in three adult Catholics overall, will constitute a larger share of U.S. Catholics going forward since they make up nearly half (45 percent) of all Catholics in the 18–29 age range. Indeed, 25 percent in this group report that they are not affiliated with any particular religion. With young people from all ethnic groups marrying and starting families later, they are often out of reach of the church from their mid-teens to their marriage.

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Jesuits enter St. John's Church for the Mass of the Holy Spirit at Creighton University.

Why?

What is the most basic reason the Catholic population is not growing? The most obvious answer is that people are leaving the church at higher rates than they are joining and they are not baptizing their children Catholic at the same rate as their parents and grandparents did. One in three Americans raised Catholic has left the church—to go where? Some join evangelical churches or mainline denominations, a small number become Muslims or Jews, and some just abandon religion altogether. As the sociologists say, they joined the "nones"—they have no religious affiliation. This group now represents 16 percent of the adult population.

Other underlying causes? Liberal Catholics leave because of the way the church treats women, sexuality, and politics among other concerns. Conservatives leave because they believe that the post-Vatican II church has abandoned its distinctiveness, aped the ways of secular society, and pursued a liberal social agenda to name a few reasons. Many leave because they have married someone who is not Catholic. Again, according to Pew, 37 percent of Americans marry someone from another denomination. Many of these elect to convert to the spouse's religion; some become Catholic; but many others leave Catholicism. Some, on both sides of the traditional/progressive divide, attribute it to ineffective catechesis. Perhaps more important, many who join another Christian denomination (including evangelical churches) do so because they have found a more suitable spiritual home there. They join churches in which the worship is more vibrant and contemporary.

The church has also been wracked by an ongoing sexual abuse scandal that has taken its toll. In some dioceses particularly hard hit by the scandal, participation in weekly Mass has dramatically declined. In Boston, for example, once the bastion of Irish-American Catholicism, weekly participation now stands at 16%. This, of course, is not confined to the American Church. The Church in Ireland, also scarred by sexual abuse, has seen a decline in participation from 90% in the 1970s to about 25% today.

Mark Gray, Research Associate at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, describes other reasons. "The monthly Mass attendance is the new weekly attendance. People don't have the same sense of sin of missing weekly Mass, even though the church teachings in that area haven't changed. People say they're busy or they have to work." One indicator of this disposition is Catholics' waning participation in Holy Days of Obligation. Just check the bulletin in any parish to compare the Mass schedule for a Holy Day—it usually has about half the number of Masses compared to a Sunday schedule. Though the church considers it a sin to miss Mass on a Holy Day, many Catholics do not, and parishes have adjusted to this new reality by scheduling fewer Masses.

The church is now engaged in a wide campaign for evangelization, and it is not non-Catholics they are trying to reach. It is baptized Catholics who are not aware of, or do not embrace, the gospel or the Catholic Church. A document titled Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States was approved on November 18, 1992, by the American bishops, and they have a standing committee on evangelization and catechesis. As they know all too well, they have their work cut out for them. ■