

“This is not a book to read and place back your shelf. *Faith and Spiritual Life of Young Adult Catholics in a Rising Hispanic Church* is a call to action; an invitation to transform how we think of and practice ministry with young adults. Drawing on important research from the CARA Report, this book explores how young adults actually practice their faith and what it means for faith communities to engage young people outside the traditional diocesan and parish ministry models. As such, this book invites all ministry leaders, indeed, all people of faith, to transform their understanding of and practice of ministry with young adults.”

— Tracey Lamont, PhD, Director, Loyola Institute for
Ministry, Loyola University New Orleans

“New lessons for new times! This book will provide you critical insight into ministry with Hispanic young people, and crucial aspects overlooked by previous studies. The research reaffirms the role of authentic faith communities to accompany young people who pray and reflect on their daily life and discern a call to service for others. The well-informed essays will help you explore how to foster new spiritual growth with young adults in your Catholic community and across the country.”

— Jose Matos Auffant, National Catholic Network de
Pastoral Juvenil Hispana (LaRED)

“This study is groundbreaking as it represents a fresh, new look at familiar questions and expected answers. The book not only has cultural and ethnic implications, but also offers important methods for parishes, ecclesial movements and the church in general to consider when doing outreach to young adults, as it reinforces the point that affirmation of our human dignity and a welcoming attitude are paramount for faith communities.”

— Fr. Juan J. Molina Flores, President, Mexican American
Catholic College

“What a breath of fresh air! Amid the sobering realities and statistics we often hear about young adult Catholics, this book offers a ray of hope for what is emerging before our very eyes. Pastoral leaders and concerned Catholics will find, in *Faith and Spiritual Life of Young Adult Catholics in a Rising Hispanic Church*, hopeful news that young adults are more connected to the faith than we may have realized and that the domestic church in the home is growing in new and exciting ways. While there will certainly be challenges ahead, the insights and ideas of this book give us the confidence to face that future with our heads held high.”

— Paul Jarzembowski, Associate Director for the Laity,
Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth,
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

“Filled with research that is both sobering and hopeful, this book invites all of us, whether or not we primarily serve young adults or Hispanic/Latino communities, to critically reflect on the state of the church in terms of these important demographics. It is substantive in breadth and depth without losing the tactile value that supports its reader in discovering a way forward that honors the reality of our times. This research commentary is a valuable lens to which we should all hold up our ministries, asking ourselves if we are truly serving the needs of the church today.”

— Nicole M. Perone, National Coordinator, ESTEEM,
Founding Board Chair, National Institute for Ministry
with Young Adults

Faith and Spiritual Life of Young Adult Catholics in a Rising Hispanic Church

Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate

Edited by
Thomas P. Gaunt, SJ



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Categories to name people that the US Census Office identifies as US Hispanic and those of Latin American and Caribbean heritage and culture are often debated. In this book, we honor the terms each author has chosen to refer to this diverse population. Doing so highlights particular sensibilities in the way authors articulate self-understandings, the complexity of this sociocultural experience, and some generational shifts.

Introduction

Mark M. Gray

In recent years, social scientists and pollsters have noted a significant shift toward secularization among young adults in the United States. For example, a 2016 review of survey data by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) concluded, “Today, nearly four in ten (39%) young adults (ages 18-29) are religiously unaffiliated—three times the unaffiliated rate (13%) among seniors (ages 65 and older). While previous generations were also more likely to be religiously unaffiliated in their twenties, young adults today are nearly four times as likely as young adults a generation ago to identify as religiously unaffiliated.”¹ The Pew Research Center drew similar conclusions in 2015, noting, “The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing. . . . While the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly pronounced among young adults, it is occurring among Americans of all ages.”²

The General Social Survey (GSS) indicates young Catholics have been increasingly leaving the faith in which they were

¹ Robert Jones et al., *Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion—and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back* (Washington, DC: Public Religion Research Institute, 2016), 3.

² See Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape: Demographic Study,” May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf>.

raised. In 1973, 84 percent of those raised Catholic in the United States remained Catholics as adults, with only 6 percent disaffiliating and reporting no religious affiliation. This trend remained steady until the early 1990s. Catholic affiliation rates then began to fall, and the share not identifying with any religion began to rise. In 2018, only 64 percent of those raised Catholic remained Catholic as adults, and 19 percent had no religious affiliation.³ A 2017 study, *Going, Going, Gone*, found that the median age at which young Catholics are disaffiliating is 13.⁴

Among the Catholics who remain in the faith into young adulthood, the statistics also point to lower levels of engagement, comparatively speaking. For example, Pew's 2015 report indicates younger Millennial Catholics (born 1990-1996) attend religious services less often than any other Christian group.⁵ They estimate that 26 percent of younger Millennial Catholics attend at least once a week, compared to 58 percent of Evangelical Protestants, 48 percent of Historically Black Protestants, and 32 percent of mainline Protestants of the same generation.

Looking beyond these religious retention rates and frequencies of weekly Mass attendance, this book explores something new: how young adult Catholics are practicing their faith in ways that may not be captured in the traditional survey research questions used for decades by sociologists of religion. Specifically, it looks at participation of young adult Catholics in Small Christian Communities. These are, relatively speaking, an understudied phenomenon. In 2000, Bernard Lee conducted one of the few existing studies of these groups; describing them, he wrote, "Christians are gathering on their

³ Tom Smith et al., *General Social Surveys, 1972–2018* (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center [NORC], 2019).

⁴ Robert J. McCarty and John M. Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 2017), 74.

⁵ Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape."

own initiative to form communities—usually small ones that are often supported by priests and religious sisters and brothers. But the membership and leadership are largely lay.”⁶

These emerging lay communities are often informal and outside of the traditional parish setting. They may involve domestic settings and include prayer, Bible study, and other forms of worship and practice. Thus, these communities’ activities are not often captured by surveys about religion that focus on attendance at religious services, parish registration, parish giving, or the reception of sacraments. To what extent are young adult Catholics participating in these communities? Do they participate in them as well as in their parishes, or has this become a new way of practicing the faith without engaging in traditional parish life? How did these communities fare during the COVID-19 pandemic when many Catholics could not engage in parish life in ways they have in the past?

This volume is based on two recent national surveys from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA): one of young adult Catholics and the other of members of Small Christian Communities. The first two chapters broadly explore the results of these surveys. The chapters that follow provide commentary on these results and explore important differences by ethnicity, within families and households, across generations, and specifically among Hispanic Catholics—the fastest-growing segment of the Catholic Church in the United States. What these results mean for the Catholic Church and its approach to young adults is also explored.

What unfolds in this volume is an examination of the ways in which many young adult Catholics are now active in their faith but not necessarily in the traditional context. We also examine why they are making these choices. We find some are disillusioned with their parish and its leadership. Some have

⁶ Bernard Lee, *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 5.

concerns about specific Church teachings. Others just say they prefer to practice their faith outside of traditional parish life. These results provide a more complete portrait of how young adult Catholics are practicing their faith—a portrait that has been largely missing in existing research about young adults and religion and that offers a glimpse of a much more active faith life than what has been noted in research in recent years.

CHAPTER ONE

Faith Group Activity among Catholic Young Adults

Mark M. Gray

Introduction

This first chapter provides a national overview of how young adult Catholics in the United States live out their faith, in parishes and, more notably, at home and in their communities. Results presented here are from a national survey including 2,214 young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five during the summer of 2020. The margin of sampling error for the survey is ± 3.6 percentage points. A fuller explanation of the methodology is available in the Appendix.

The Faith Life of Young Adult Catholics

Most young adult Catholics report that they have had some form of religious education and/or formation in their youth. Three in four young adult Catholics have participated in parish-based religious education and/or a parish youth group as a minor. Eight in ten entered the faith as an infant or a child. Eighty-two percent have received their First Communion, and 73 percent have been confirmed. A third have attended a Catholic school at some point between kindergarten and twelfth grade.

The young adult Catholic respondents surveyed were presented with a list of Church-related programs and groups and asked if they had ever participated in any of these. This list included some groups that are Small Christian Communities and lay movements. Overall, 37 percent of respondents indicated that they have done so at some point. They were most likely to report having participated in a parish or diocesan young adult group (15%), a religious institute volunteer group (9%), Knights of Columbus (6%), pro-life events or groups (5%), or in a St. Vincent de Paul Society group (4%). Three percent or fewer have participated in a named Small Christian Community (SCC). While these percentages may be small, they represent sizable populations. Even 1 percent of the young adult Catholic population represents approximately 200,000 individuals.

Some of the “other” groups named by 3 percent of respondents included altar server, choir, mission trips, RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), names of parishes or schools, Vacation Bible School, and youth group. Others indicated that they participate in Bible study, Catholic Daughters of the Americas, Catholic Women of the Chapel, Conquistando las Naciones para Cristo, Emaus, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students), Frassati Society of Young Adult Catholics, Theology on Tap, Young Life, or Youth for Christ.

Respondents were asked if they participate in any Catholic group or community of people with whom they regularly meet, outside of Mass, to practice their faith, provide service or assistance to others, or evangelize and spread their faith to others. Overall, 46 percent of Catholic young adults reported that they were active in a group that does at least one of these three things. They were most likely to indicate they were active in groups that practice the faith (e.g., Bible study, prayer, devotions, and/or faith sharing).

Finally, we asked respondents about the ways they practiced their Catholic faith with others outside of the parish or attend-

Table 1.1

Have you ever participated in any of the following Church-related programs, groups, or activities as an adult?

	Percentage “Yes”
Parish or diocesan young adult group	15%
Religious institute volunteer (e.g., Mercy Volunteer Corps)	9%
Knights of Columbus	6%
Pro-life events/groups	5%
St. Vincent de Paul Society	4%
Jóvenes Para Cristo	3%
Legion of Mary	2%
Charismatic Renewal	2%
Cursillo	2%
Amor en Acción	1%
Movimiento Familiar Cristiano	1%
Juan XXIII	1%
Neocatechumenal Way	1%
Other	3%

Source: Data from *Faith and Spiritual Life of Catholics in the United States* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2021).

ing Mass prior to the pandemic as an open-ended question where respondents answered in their own words. These were coded and categorized. Ten percent of responses to this question describe an activity consistent with participation in Small Christian Communities, lay movements, and other forms of practicing the faith with others (non-family) outside of the parish.

Once the responses to all three of these questions are combined, we can discern that a majority of young adult Catholics, 60 percent, indicate in some way that they are practicing their

faith outside of attending Mass at their parish. Overall, 13 percent of young adult Catholics attended Mass weekly or more often prior to the pandemic. Twenty-one percent attended less than weekly but at least once a month. Two-thirds of respondents attended Mass a few times a year or less often.

Using frequency of Mass attendance (prior to the pandemic) and respondent reports of faith group participation, we can separate the sample into four groups, as shown in Table 1.2. About a quarter of young adult Catholics is active in parish life as well as in faith groups outside of Mass attendance and their parish. The smallest group includes those who attend Mass at least once a month and do not participate in any other faith group (7%). A third attends Mass infrequently and does not participate in a faith group. Finally, 34 percent of Catholic young adults indicate they are infrequent Mass attenders but do participate in a faith group outside of Mass attendance at their parish.

Anecdotally, infrequent attenders—especially young people—are often assumed to be generally inactive in their faith. Yet, it appears that one in three Catholic young adults who are infrequent attenders are still active in their faith—just outside of the traditional parish context.

Respondents who attend Mass less than weekly were presented with a list of reasons why they might have missed Mass prior to the pandemic. Among young adult Catholics who do attend Mass less than weekly, the two reasons that most frequently apply to all of these respondents, regardless of their participation in a faith group, is a busy schedule or a lack of time and a belief that missing Mass is not a sin.

Among those young adult Catholics who attend Mass a few times a year or less often (i.e., less than monthly) and who also participate in a faith group, the next most important reason for missing Mass is a preference to practice their faith outside of the parish (49%). Among those who participate in faith groups and attend Mass at least monthly, family responsibili-

Table 1.2

Mass attendance and faith group participation.

	Participates in faith group(s) outside of Mass and parish	Does not participate in faith group(s)
Attends Mass at least monthly or more often	26%	7%
Attends Mass a few times a year or less often	34%	33%

Source: Data from *Faith and Spiritual Life of Catholics in the United States* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2021).

ties are also a frequently cited reason for missing Mass (57%). This is also the case for monthly attendees who do not participate in any faith groups (46%). For those who attend Mass infrequently and who do not participate in any faith group, another commonly cited reason is viewing oneself as “not a very religious person” (53%).

Despite anecdotes that may be frequently noted, feeling alienated with the Church is seldom cited by young adult Catholics as a reason they miss Mass. Feeling that Mass does not meet their spiritual needs is also relatively infrequently cited as a reason for this.

All respondents were asked about things that might make them less likely to be active in parish life. Among those who attend Mass less than monthly but who participate in faith groups, the things most likely to make young adults less active in their parish were the Church’s teachings on homosexuality (42% saying this makes them “somewhat” or “very” less likely to be active), allegations of clergy sexually abusing minors (41%), feeling older generations have too much influence in

Table 1.3

How well did each of the following explain, if at all, why you missed Mass?

	Participates in a Faith Group		Does Not Participate in a Faith Group	
	<Monthly Mass Attender	Monthly+ Mass Attender	<Monthly Mass Attender	Monthly+ Mass Attender
Busy schedule or lack of time	56%	64%	55%	57%
I don't believe missing Mass is a sin	55%	47%	61%	41%
I prefer to practice my faith outside of the parish	49%	36%	43%	16%
Family responsibilities	44%	57%	37%	46%
I am not a very religious person	43%	25%	53%	28%
Inconvenient Mass schedule	34%	43%	30%	39%
Masses don't meet my spiritual needs	32%	24%	35%	19%
I find Mass too boring	28%	27%	40%	14%
Conflict with work	27%	38%	23%	29%
I feel alienated from the Church	24%	22%	24%	8%
Out of town travel	23%	38%	14%	31%
Health problems or a disability	17%	32%	8%	23%
Unable to find transportation	14%	26%	8%	20%
I am divorced or married outside of the Church	12%	16%	6%	8%

Source: Data from *Faith and Spiritual Life of Catholics in the United States* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2021).

Table 1.4

How much, if at all, have the following ever made you less likely to be active in parish life?

	Participates in a Faith Group		Does Not Participate in a Faith Group	
	<Monthly Mass Attender	Monthly+ Mass Attender	<Monthly Mass Attender	Monthly+ Mass Attender
The Church's teachings on homosexuality	42%	40%	47%	32%
Allegations of Catholic clergy sexually abusing minors	41%	44%	46%	39%
Feeling that older generations have too much influence in the parish	39%	40%	32%	20%
The roles available to women in the Church	37%	36%	28%	22%
The Church's teachings on the use of birth control	36%	35%	33%	28%
Feeling like the Church is not open to dialogue with other religious faiths	34%	36%	32%	17%
My perception of the Church's participation in politics and elections	33%	35%	29%	16%
Being asked for donations	31%	33%	28%	16%
The Church's teachings on divorce and remarriage	31%	34%	33%	22%
The parish is not welcoming to different ethnic or cultural Catholic groups	28%	32%	20%	10%
The parish is not welcoming to young adults	26%	29%	21%	17%
The parish is not welcoming to a family member or friend	24%	28%	15%	12%
Feeling like the parish is not sufficiently adhering to the traditions of the Church	22%	30%	15%	15%

Source: Data from *Faith and Spiritual Life of Catholics in the United States* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2021).

the parish (39%), and the roles available to women in the Church (37%). Other respondents with varying frequencies of Mass attendance and involvement with faith groups have a similar ranking of the issues that prevent them from being more active in their parish.

The reasons that are among the least likely to be keeping young adults who attend Mass less than monthly but who are active in a faith group from being active in their parish are feeling like the parish is not adhering to the traditions of the Church (22%), the parish not being welcoming to a family member or friend (24%), the parish not welcoming young adults (26%), and the parish not welcoming different ethnic or cultural groups (28%). Respondents who are not active in faith groups are even less likely to say these things make them less likely to be active in parish life.

Thus, young adults are not as likely to report a feeling that they or friends and family feel unwelcome at their parish and are more likely to bring up issues related to Church teachings or scandal as keeping them away.

Generally speaking, young adult Catholics who participate in faith groups are more likely than those who do not participate in these to have experienced the sacraments of initiation, to have been involved in Catholic youth groups as a child, and to have attended Catholic schools and/or been involved in parish-based religious education. Thus, some of the motivation for their desire to be active in groups related to their faith may be an extension of habits and norms they developed in their childhood.

There are few demographic differences between respondents in their self-reporting of being active in a faith group. Women are similarly likely to be active as men (59% compared to 61%). Non-Hispanic White respondents are only slightly less likely than Hispanic respondents to be active in a group (56% compared to 61%). One outlier are young adult Black Catholics who are especially likely to be active in a faith group

(88%).¹ Respondents with a high school education only are slightly more likely than those with a college degree to be active in a group (64% compared to 57%). Group activity is slightly higher in the West than in the Midwest (63% compared to 57%).

Faith group participants are different than non-participants in a number of other ways. A majority of faith group participants, 55 percent, agree that they think of themselves as a practicing Catholic compared to 27 percent of non-participants. At the same time, faith group participants are more likely than non-participants to agree that there have been times recently when they have struggled with their faith (50% compared to 39%). Even with these struggles, faith group participants are more likely than non-participants to agree that they could never imagine themselves leaving the Catholic Church (47% compared to 28%). Given that many faith groups have a service component, faith group participants are also more likely than non-participants to agree that helping the poor and needy is a moral obligation for Catholics (63% compared to 50%).

Respondents who are active in faith groups were asked to evaluate a list of possible motivations for their participation. They were most likely to indicate that the following were “somewhat” or “very much” a motivation for them: a desire to learn from new experiences (74%), to nourish their spiritual life (70%), to reduce negative feelings (69%), and to act or express important convictions concerning serving others (69%).

The survey provides some evidence that those involved in faith groups may be more likely than those who are not faith group participants to be socially active with non-family

¹ Of note, there were 109 Black respondents in the survey (unweighted). The margin of error for this subgroup is nearly 10 percentage points. Even with this possible variation, it appears Black Catholic young adults are indeed among the most likely to participate in faith groups; however, one cannot say with precision at what level this occurs.