

Young people are leaving the faith. Here's why

Young Catholics are leaving the Faith. Multiple national surveys indicate that only about two-thirds or fewer millennials (those born in 1982 or later) who were raised Catholic remain Catholic as adults. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) recently conducted two national studies that provide some new insight into these losses. The first few results from these studies are being released for the first time in this article.

The reasons young people leave are complex and varied. However, there is an emerging profile of one of the most common ways this happens. Many historians and Catholic theologians will say the Catholic Church has no place in a "war" between religion and science today. Yet the Church does appear to be losing a related battle nonetheless. Some young Catholics have told CARA that they are leaving the Faith for science, believing that Catholicism is incompatible with what they are learning in high school or at the university level. CARA's research indicates that this phenomenon may be more common now than in the past because those raised Catholic today are significantly less likely than previous generations to have attended Catholic schools where religion and science are taught side by side.

In their own words

The first CARA study, commissioned by Saint Mary's Press, involved a survey with a random, national sample of young people, ages 15 to 25, who had been raised Catholic but no longer self-identified as such. The second CARA study, made possible through funding from the John Templeton Foundation, involved a survey of a random sample of self-identified Catholics, ages 18 and older, and focused on matters of

religion and science.

The interviews with youth and young adults who had left the Catholic Faith revealed that the typical age for this decision to leave was made at 13. Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed, 63 percent, said they stopped being Catholic between the ages of 10 and 17. Another 23 percent say they left the Faith before the age of 10. Those who leave are just as likely to be male as they are female, and their demographics generally mirror those of all young Catholics their age. So why are they leaving?

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To find the answer, CARA began its interviews with these former Catholics with an open-ended question: "What are the reasons that explain why you are no longer Catholic?" One in 5 answered in a manner that reflected that they no longer believed in God or religion. No other reason was provided as frequently. Some others had changed faiths when their parents did (16 percent) or independently selected another religion (15 percent). Eleven percent said they were opposed to the Catholic Church or the concept of organized religion. No other reason was given by at least 1 in 10 respondents. Among the 1 in 5 who noted a loss of belief, some of the typical reasons given in their own words were:

- "Because I grew up realized it was a story like Santa or the Easter Bunny."
- "As I learn more about the world around me and understand things that I once did not, I find that the thought of an all-powerful being to be less and less believable."

– “Catholic beliefs aren’t based on fact. Everything is hearsay from back before anything could be documented, so nothing can be disproved, but it certainly shouldn’t be taken seriously.”

– “I realized that religion is in complete contradiction with the rational and scientific world, and to continue to subscribe to a religion would be hypocritical.”

– “Need proof of something.”

– “It no longer fits into what I understand of the universe.”

After the open-ended question, CARA provided the former Catholics with a list of 24 reasons that might lead one to leave the Faith. They were asked to say how important each of these were to their decision. Half of respondents said the following two reasons were either “somewhat” or “very” important to their decision to leave: that they had stopped believing in what the Catholic Church teaches, and that they did not like the Catholic Church’s rules and judgmental approach. These were the most common reasons cited.

Only 13 percent said they were ever likely to return to the Catholic Church. When CARA asked these respondents to “Please describe what would make you consider returning to the Catholic Faith in the future,” responses included: “If someone discovered evidence of the supernatural” or “replicable, peer reviewed, conclusive proof that a deity exists and I’m guaranteed a happy afterlife.” Such answers reflect the difficulty these youth and young adults are having in understanding how a religious faith and scientific reason can coexist.

Half of the young former Catholics self-identify today as atheists, agnostics or those without a religious affiliation. Among the others leaving for another faith, the Catholic Church might consider ways to better explain the Catholic Faith and meet the religious and spiritual needs of

disaffected Catholic youth.

Yet to prevent young Catholics leaving religion because they are struggling with the whole broader concept of faith, what is the Church to do? CARA's in-depth interviews with the youth and young adults surfaced more details about the challenges the Church faces. For example, see the exchange between the interviewer and the following young male former Catholic:

Interviewer: You said you started getting into math and into science. Were there things you were reading in particular ... that made you doubt the religious side of things?

Respondent: I wasn't reading anything in particular, but just with school. I always have been very smart, and I was always studious. But as I started to enjoy math and science more, I just realized the discrepancy between religion and science. I guess that was another shaking point. Obviously the two can coexist fairly easily – people do it all the time – but for me, I was one of those more toward the science end of things. Catholicism, especially, did seem to clash fairly well. And then, of course, again, further along the line, that pushed me away from the Church a bit more because of the belief in science that really don't stack up with religion as far as agreeing with each other.

Another young male was not initially challenged by what he was learning in school but by trying to discern the effectiveness of prayer during a tragic time for his family as evidence of God:

Interviewer: You say that about age 11, you first started having doubts about being Catholic. Do you remember what precipitated it?

Respondent: Knowledge. ... The original root cause would have been watching my whole mother's family, on my mother's side, pray for my grandpa's lung cancer. And everyone is praying for him – probably over 150 people, personally praying for him.

And still there was nothing done to help him. And that was my first skepticism.

Finally, in this young female former Catholic, we find someone who is self-identifying as an agnostic, showing skepticism but also incorporating spiritual or religious ideas into her thinking:

Interviewer: So what do you currently believe in?

Respondent: I don't really have a label for it. I guess the closest thing I have looked at would be agnostic. ... I don't identify with atheist because I do believe that there is something more.

Interviewer: How do you envision that?

Respondent: Hopefully it's something like when you die, that as long as you were a good person when you are alive, then you should be OK in whatever afterlife there is. So I would think maybe it is something like that, kind of. Or, actually, what I think I prefer is the idea of reincarnation; I like that one.

Interviewer: Do you believe in heaven or hell?

Respondent: I do believe in demons and ghosts, even if it sounds kind of silly. You see all the stories out there and, like, some of them must have some truth to them. I do believe that there is probably something like more of a hell side, I guess, or some kind of limbo where there are unhappy souls. I do believe there is a more positive side if you were a good person and didn't have any conflicts left to resolve.

Interviewer: Do you have any particular beliefs about the Bible and Jesus? Whether Jesus was a real person? Whether the Bible is true? Whether science is true?

Respondent: That was probably the reason that I did not identify with any particular religion. I don't think that anyone can prove if one is right or one is wrong. The Bible

and Jesus specifically, since, like, if you say Catholicism or Christianity, in general, they would say that Jesus was a real person and that he was divine. But then you take Judaism, I believe they include Jesus, but he is not divine, and then if you take Islam, they have the Prophet Mohammed, who has a lot of similarities to Jesus. Or to the Quran that are very similar. So, between the conflicts of all of those, I would find it hard to say which one is right. There is truth in each of them.

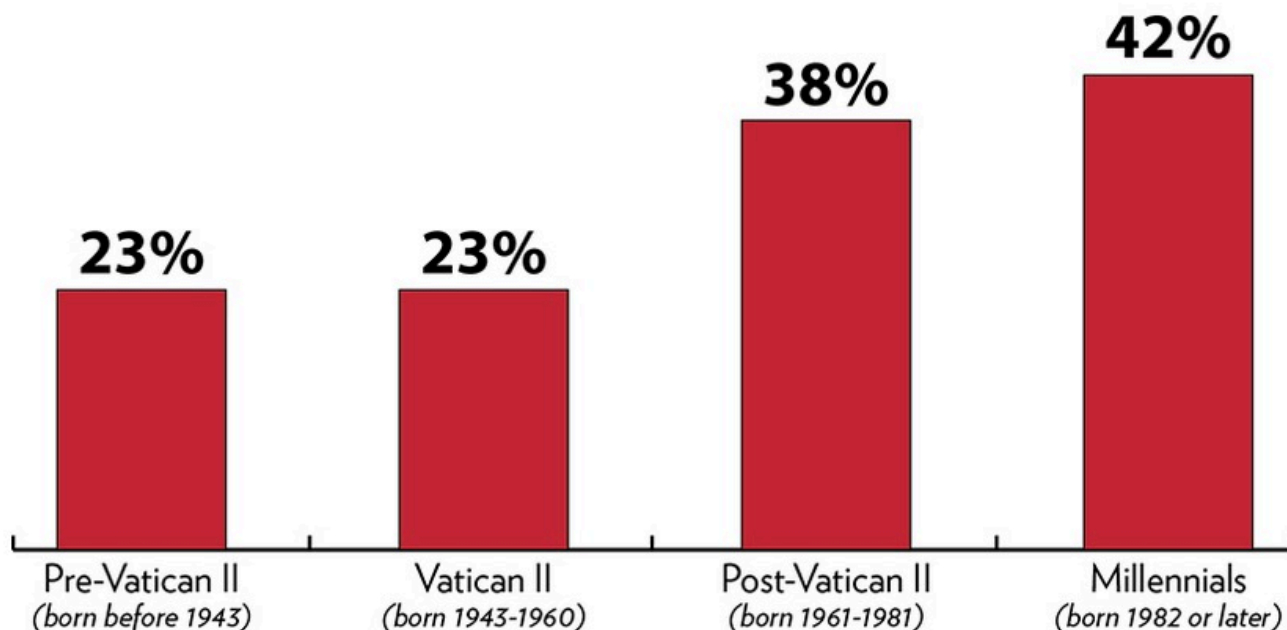
Interviewer: Some think that the scientific worldview is opposite of religion, and some people think they go together. Has science and the scientific worldview become more persuasive to you than religion?

Respondent: Well, I know for evolution there's that big conflict between the Christian church and science, because parts of the Christian church don't agree with evolution. But that one I feel like there is a ton of evidence. Evolution, that part, at least, is pretty solid looking to me. But then we learned about the Big Bang theory also in school and, like, that one seemed a little odd to me. I haven't researched it more in depth, but I don't know; that one sounds a bit far-fetched to me.

This longer interview excerpt demonstrates the complexity of the challenges facing the Church. This young woman is agnostic, yet she still believes in an afterlife incorporating reincarnation, hell and limbo. She is unsure of the divinity of Jesus. She believes in evolution but less so in the Big Bang. Is this possibly representative of adult Catholics in the United States more generally? CARA's Religion and Science Poll indeed shows that many do not understand where the Church stands on matters of science and in some cases on matters of faith. Some of this misunderstanding appears to be related to religious education or a lack thereof.

Participation in Catholic Education

The following shows, by generation, the percentage of U.S. adult Catholics who were never enrolled in Catholic education or participated in youth or college ministry programs.



Source: CARA

Role of Catholic education

Catholics of the Post-Vatican II era (born 1961-1981) and millennial generations are less likely than older Catholics of the Vatican II (born 1943-1960) and pre-Vatican II (born before 1943) generations to have been formally enrolled in Catholic religious education. Among millennial Catholics, only 30 percent were ever enrolled in a Catholic primary school, 36 percent in parish-based religious education and 18 percent in a Catholic high school.

Among the young former Catholics CARA interviewed for Saint Mary's Press, only 19 percent had ever been enrolled in a Catholic primary school, 34 percent in parish-based religious education and 8 percent in a Catholic high school.

The Catholic school environment is unique among educational institutions in the United States. It is a context where students can learn about their faith and science on the same day and in the same place. They may be in a religious education class at one moment and in a laboratory learning

about evolution in the next. This is something a Catholic student in a public school or at another private Christian school is unable or very unlikely to encounter. Forty-two percent of millennial Catholics have never been enrolled in a Catholic school, parish-based religious education, nor in a youth or young adult ministry program. Post-Vatican II generation Catholics are almost equally likely to have never had this early formation (38 percent). Fewer than a quarter of older Catholics lack this experience and the knowledge that came with it.

Given the trends in formal religious education, we might expect confusion about matters of Catholicism and science to be widespread. CARA asked adult Catholics in the Religion and Science Poll if they could name “any famous scientists in history” who were Catholic. Thirteen percent could correctly name Galileo. No other single figure topped 4 percent, and many who were named were not Catholic (e.g., Einstein, Newton). This obscures the reality that a large number of Enlightenment scientists were Catholic, some clergy, and were often conducting their research in the context of Catholic colleges and universities with the full support of the Church.

While those attending Catholic schools today are still unlikely to read any of the recent scholarship correcting the historical record of the Church’s deep and positive involvement in the Enlightenment, one might expect that any alumni of Catholic schools might know that the Church never spoke out against or banned Charles Darwin’s “On the Origin of Species” (1859) and that modern popes have spoken in support for evolution (while noting this science has yet to understand or find evidence of how life came from nonliving material). They may also be more likely to have learned that the notion of an expanding universe from a “primeval atom” was proposed by Georges Lemaître, a Belgian Catholic priest, astronomer and physicist, which became critical to the understanding of the Big Bang and the expansion of the universe.

There are no big variations among adult Catholics across religious education subgroups in terms of belief in God or the percentage saying that their beliefs are based more on evidence than faith. Differences begin to emerge with some of the details, in questions regarding the Bible and science. Three in 10 Catholics with no Catholic religious education or participation in youth ministry believe that the Bible should be taken literally, word for word. Only half as many who attended a Catholic school at some point believe this, as do about 1 in 5 who were in parish-based religious education. Fewer than 1 in 10 who attended a Catholic college or university responded as such.

Only 36 percent of those without any Catholic education or participation in youth or young adult ministry agrees with the scientific understanding of the Big Bang and creation of the universe, and 49 percent agree with evolution by natural selection leading to human beings. Those with some Catholic education are more likely to accept both of these aspects of scientific knowledge.

Across the board, those with formal Catholic education at some point in their early life are more likely than those without this to believe that scientific understandings of the creation of the universe are compatible with the belief in God as a creator and that it is acceptable to the Church for Catholics to believe humans evolved over time from other lifeforms.

Implications for the Church

The Catholic Church has few disagreements with modern science. Where differences do emerge is most often related to questions that science has no evidence for and may never be able to answer. It has always been the case that scientists have believed many things on faith before any evidence emerged to confirm or deny these beliefs. This is an essential part to developing and testing hypotheses within the scientific method. While the Catholic Church may disagree with biologist

Richard Dawkins' faith in what he believes to be the origin of life from nonliving matter or with astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson's faith in what he believes preceded the Big Bang, there is much about Catholicism that is entirely consistent with scientific evidence today.

The same cannot be said for other forms of Christianity – particularly evangelical denominations, which are more likely to take the Bible literally word for word. Yet, the Catholic Church appears to be thrown into the religion vs. science war, which is most evident in disagreements and debates between New Atheism biologists and evangelical Christians regarding evolution and the Book of Genesis. The Catholic Church might lose fewer of those raised in the Faith if the Church were more effectively able to communicate that Catholicism is not a party to this conflict. The Church has been steadily balancing matters of faith and reason since St. Augustine's work in the fifth century. In more recent times, it has passed on these traditions within the context of Catholic schools and universities. Yet, with fewer and fewer young Catholics in the United States ever experiencing these educational environments, Catholicism's relationship to science is becoming evermore blurry for many raised in the Faith.

Some are leaving because they believe the Church is on the "wrong side" of history and cannot coexist alongside what they have learned from modern science. It may be too late to bring them back. Yet, the Church has a chance to keep more of the young Catholics being baptized now if it can do more to correct the historical myths about the Church in regards to science (see sidebar on Galileo) and continue to highlight its support for the sciences, which were, for the most part, an initial product of the work done in Catholic universities hundreds of years ago.

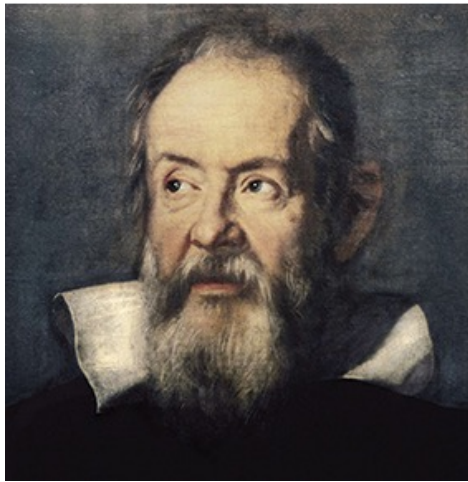
Seemingly unknown to many, this work continues to this day on Catholic campuses, and these remain very special places where young minds are engaging faith and reason without any great

conflicts.

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Reassessing Galileo

Who is Galileo? A famed Italian astronomer and mathematician, Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) held academic posts in Pisa, Padua and Florence. **Why is he important to Church history?** The story of Galileo is most often cited as the key piece of evidence of Catholicism's "anti-scientific" nature.



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What was the controversy surrounding him? Galileo promoted the unpopular belief that the sun was at the center of the universe with Earth and the other planets rotating around it. In 1616, he was warned by the Holy Office to stop teaching the theory, which he ignored. He was tried and reportedly jailed, and the Church made him recant.

Does this episode prove the Church is anti-science? Recent scholarship in history and the social science has revealed most of what one might have learned about Galileo in school or in popular culture is nearly nonsense. As social scientist Rodney Stark has recently noted in "Bearing False Witness: Debunking Centuries of Anti-Catholic History" (Templeton Press, \$27.95), Galileo "was neither imprisoned nor tortured" and that "what got Galileo in trouble with the Church was not his scientific convictions nearly as much as his arrogant duplicity." Stark is not alone in revealing this, as the myth of Galileo headlines historian Ronald L. Number's volume "Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion" (Harvard University Press, \$20.50). As Maurice A. Finocchiaro notes in Number's book, "Galileo's alleged crimes fell short of formal heresy, which would have justified corporal punishment." Instead, he was found guilty of a lesser charge of "vehement suspicion of heresy." Thus, some of Galileo's work, in the context of the Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation, was seen as a public violation of Church authority and less so a matter for real scientific disagreement.

As for the book that got him in trouble with the Church, it was the discussion of Earth movement in a fictional dialogue that became a concern. Most of the other content unrelated to the Earth movement was of little note. As Stark writes, "Ironically, much that Galileo presented in the book as correct science was not."

What does the Church teach about ...?

Science and religion

“Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason. Since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 159).



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Evolution

In dealing with a theory like Darwin's, Catholics should anchor themselves in the proposition that there can be no real conflict between faith and science. The Catholic Church has never had a problem with evolution (as opposed to philosophical Darwinism, which sees man solely as the product of materialist forces). Unlike Luther and Calvin and modern fundamentalists, the Church has never taught that the first chapter of Genesis is meant to teach science. The Church insists that man is not an accident; that no matter how he went about creating homo sapiens, God from all eternity intended that man and all creation exist in their present form.

Creation

In the Nicene Creed, we profess belief in “one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.” Just as there is one God, so also is there one creation that includes all that is not God. Catholics are not obliged to square scientific data with the early verses of Genesis, whose truths are expressed in an archaic, prescientific Hebrew idiom.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “God himself created the visible world in all its richness, diversity and order. Scripture presents the work of the Creator symbolically as a succession of six days of divine ‘work,’ concluded by the ‘rest’ of the seventh day. ... Nothing exists that does not owe its existence to God the Creator. The world began when God's word drew it out of nothingness; all existent beings, all of nature, and all human history are rooted in this primordial event, the very genesis by which the world was constituted and time begun” (No. 337-338).

Source: Our Sunday Visitor's Encyclopedia of Catholic Doctrine