

# Why are millennials losing their faith?



Comedian and writer Jared Bilski recently penned an article for the Washington Post titled, “I’m not passing on my parents’ religion to my kids, but I am teaching their values.”

In it he articulates the reasons he personally rejected Catholicism and prefers not to raise his 3-year-old daughter and 1-year-old son in the Faith. His piece reads like a case study of the millennial faith-experience.

“Not only did I attend Catholic school for 13 years, from kindergarten straight through high school, I also immersed myself in all religious amenities such an upbringing afforded me,” Bilski wrote. “I was an altar boy and a church reader. I played the part of Jesus Christ during our grade school’s Easter play. ... I even strongly considered going into the priesthood. Gradually, however, I lost faith in my faith. There were too many unanswered questions, too many problematic absolutes, too much fearmongering and way too much hypocrisy. For a religion that placed such a premium on loving thy neighbor, it sure had a lot of restrictions on whom you were allowed to love. When the priest sex abuse scandal broke – a scandal the scope of which we’re still learning about – I knew I’d never return.”

## Losing faith by age 13

Reading his article reminded me of a 2016 study by the Center of Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) that found that 86% of people who eventually leave the Church said that they’d actually lost their faith between the ages of 10-17. According to the lead researcher, Mark Gray, the average person lost

their faith by age 13.

This struck me at the time, because it meant that the traditional concerns about Catholic children losing their faith in college was misplaced. Apparently a very large number of Catholic kids live as spiritual zombies – going through the motions although spiritually dead – for up to 10 years before anyone notices. Everyone assumes things are just fine because these kids are still showing up on Sunday with mom and dad, or serving Mass, or going to Catholic school, or making an appearance in the Christmas or Easter pageants. The first inkling that something is wrong is in college, when these kids start controlling their own time and stop going to Church.

## **Stages of learning faith**

Bilski's piece illustrates a problem that almost no one in the Church is addressing. As my wife and I describe in our book, ["Discovering God Together: The Catholic Guide to Raising Faithful Kids"](#) (Sophia Institute, \$18.95), faith evolves in stages throughout the various phases of childhood and adulthood. In order to become faithful adults, kids need different spiritual food at each stage.

In middle-childhood, kids occupy what we might call the "Stories, Rules and Structures Stage" of faith (technically, the "Mythic-Literal Stage"). This is the time when kids learn the stories and participate in the rituals that teach basic values, such as how to tell right from wrong, what it means to be a good person and how to engage in basic moral reasoning.

By the tween years – right around the time CARA found that many children lose their faith – kids are moving to the "Relationship and Mission Stage" of faith (technically, the "Synthetic-Conventional Stage"). At this stage, something is true if it facilitates teens' relationships and helps them find their place in the world. By contrast, something is false if it complicates (or seems irrelevant to) their relationships

and makes it harder to claim what they consider to be a socially conscious identity.

## **Making the leap**

Bilski's mini-spiritual autobiography makes it pretty clear that his religious formation broke down in the period between the Mythic-Literal and Synthetic-Conventional faith stages. When that happens, you end up with someone who can appreciate the values he or she was raised with but struggles to see how organized religion, with all its idealized absolutes, has any relevance to real relationships and real problems.

Bilski's story is a clarion call for the Church – especially for parents and Catholic educators whose job it is to raise up the next generation of faithful Catholics. At that critical period between middle-childhood and the tween years, children need our help making the leap from the faith of stories to the faith of the real world. They need to see that their parents' faith makes a real difference in the intimacy, joy and peace they experience at home. They need to see how their parents use their faith not as an escape, but as the primary resource that helps them negotiate the challenges of adult life. In short, they need to be educated in true Christian discipleship.

As a Church we need to do more to help kids be intentional disciples and help them discover that Catholicism, more than a list of "thou-shalt-nots," is a path to joyful, intimate relationships and a meaningful life.

*Dr. Greg Popcak is the author of many books, including his latest, ["Unworried: A Life Without Anxiety"](#) (OSV, \$16.95).*