



Millennial Catholics in England and Wales



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Matthew van Duyvenbode is co-founder of Camino House, and author of *Complex Catholicism: The lives and faith of young Catholics in England and Wales today* available at <https://cymfed.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Complex-Catholicism-Typology.pdf>

In 2016, Pope Francis announced his intention to hold a global Synod of Bishops in the autumn of 2018, focusing on the theme of young people. Formally entitled *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*, the 15th synodal meeting provided an opportunity to gather Catholic bishops, leaders from other Christian traditions, expert advisors in youth ministry and young people themselves to focus on the reality of life for youth across the world. Designed to understand more fully the challenges and opportunities that young people face at the start of the third millennium, as well as to reflect on how the Catholic community can engage more meaningfully with youth, the pre-synodal work gathered evidence on a national and regional basis as well as consulting with young people on the themes and structure of conversation at the synod itself.

Some years earlier, I had been part of a cross-organisational team who had undertaken *Mapping the Terrain*, a significant piece of strategic research on young Catholics in England and Wales, which had helped to shape the underpinning priorities of the newly formed Catholic Youth Ministry Federation (CYMFed).¹ In anticipation of the opportunity to provide robust evidence to support discussions at the global Synod, and to help open up conversation around some of the national-level themes which a global synod simply cannot address, we embarked on a 12 month project to repeat the original research project eight years later. We wanted to update the available data and to identify any potential shifts in beliefs and behaviours over this period. This updated research,

entitled *Complex Catholicism*, was launched in June 2018.

How we conducted the research

The core question guiding our research was, 'What do the lives and faith experiences of young Catholics in England and Wales look like today, and how does this differ from in 2009?' In this study, we choose to focus on the experiences of 15–25 year olds, matching a comparable cohort we surveyed in 2009, and similar to the global survey conducted by the Catholic Church.² During September and October 2017, we conducted an online survey of 1,005 young people who were born between 1992 and 2002, who could be described as 'late Millennial Catholics'.³

Our method allowed us to use an almost identical survey, with a small number of questions updated or revised from the original 2009 study. Whilst the purpose of the research was not to track the demographic picture of the group, we found a roughly similar picture of geographical spread and ethnicity, albeit with a comparative increase in the proportion of those living in London (rising from 17% to 23%) and those who would describe their ethnicity as either 'Asian' (6% vs 3%) or 'Mixed' (6% vs 4%).

Complex Catholicism

One of our key findings from this research is that young Catholics do not necessarily identify themselves as such.

Learning from both practitioner experience and from our 2009 work, we did not require survey participants to self-identify as Catholic/Roman Catholic in order to participate. All possible participants were asked about their religious identity. We regarded those 15–25 year olds who selected 'Catholic/Roman Catholic' (who made up 60% of our sample) as **'Self-identifying Catholics'**. However, for those who did not actively identify as another denomination or faith group, but said 'I do not describe myself as any of these things' or 'I do not know/I am not sure', we asked a follow up question about whether they came from a Catholic family or attended a Catholic school. We regarded those who affirmed this link (who made up 40% of our sample) as **'Non-identifying Catholics'**.

Most parents, educators or those who engage in youth ministry might not be surprised to learn that those who are happy to identify as Catholic may not carry through with the behaviours, beliefs and outlook which would traditionally be associated with being an active Catholic:

- Only a fifth of this group say 'Going to Mass regularly is important to me', whilst over half say,

• 20% say that they attend Mass at least monthly (with half of these claiming weekly attendance).⁴

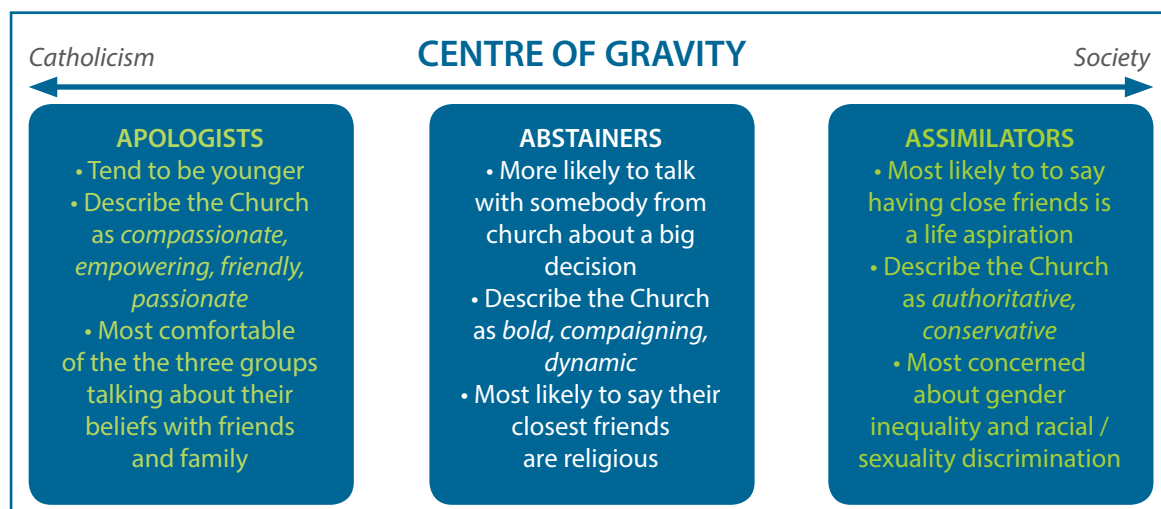
• In total, half of non-identifying Millennial Catholics say they attend Mass at least irregularly.

• Nearly two-thirds of this group can also identify having had a spiritual experience, over half say that they pray, and only one quarter say they don't believe in a divine being.

Throughout the survey, we monitored the responses of these two groups and where they differed strongly from one another, we make this clear. However, the key thing to note is that religious identity for Millennial Catholics is a complex and varied mix of self-description, belief, participation, cultural heritage, behaviours, ethos and morality.

Apologists, abstainers and assimilators

If self-described identity is not necessarily a clear barometer of 'catholicity' for Millennial Catholics, we began to look for other trends within the data which might help understand what it means to be Catholic for Millennials.



'I consider myself Catholic, but it is not especially important for me to go to Mass regularly.'

• Another fifth would say, 'I am not religious, but my personal values and decisions have been influenced by being Catholic.'

• Nearly 40% of these self-identifying Millennial Catholics avoided the term 'Son of God' in describing Jesus, instead opting to describe him as either 'a very holy person', 'a very wise person', or 'an ordinary person'.

• Only 37% of self-identifying Millennial Catholics say that 'following Catholic guidelines about their personal lives' was an important factor in being Catholic.

Meanwhile, those who were reticent about describing themselves as Catholic but hailed from a Catholic family or go/went to a Catholic school displayed surprisingly high levels of religiosity despite their ambivalence about the label 'Catholic':

Within the survey, we asked a number of attitudinal questions about the intersections between Catholicism and contemporary British society. Examining the responses to these questions using in-depth data analysis, we discovered three distinct groupings, who seemed to align based on their views on where they found the 'centre of gravity' for navigating life:

The first group place greater emphasis on Catholicism as their centre of gravity; they believe in the Catholic religion as a force for good, and do not think Catholics should keep their religious views to themselves to avoid hurting other people's feelings. We have called this group **Apologists**.

The second group look neither towards Catholicism nor society as their centre of gravity – or perhaps look towards both, but do not try to integrate these views. They disagree with the Apologists and think that Catholics should keep

NOTES

1. See www.cymfed.org.uk

2. National/Regional Catholic Bishops' Conferences were asked to promote a global survey for 16–29 year olds and/or collect similar information contextualised for their own localities.

3. We recognise here that some people may refer to part of this cohort as Gen Z, but also note that there is no consensus about this delineation yet.

4. It is important to observe that only a fraction of these sit within an age bracket where attending Mass regularly at Catholic school may have a bearing on their response.

5. Cf www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/final-document-of-the-synod-of-bishops-on-young-people-faith-an.html

their religious views to themselves. They also say that if you are part of the Catholic religion, you should follow all of its rules and teachings, but are mixed about whether the Catholic Church is a force for good. Owing to their relative ambivalence about the public nature of faith, we have called this group **Abstainers**.

The third group place greater emphasis on Society as their centre of gravity. They are strongly positive that Catholics can follow parts/teachings of different religions at the same time, and are deeply negative about Catholics seeking to try to convert others to Catholicism. Because they look to their social context as a starting point for thinking about faith, we have called this group **Assimilators**.

Our research indicates that these three groups of Millennial Catholics are roughly equally sized, though if you were to visit an average Catholic parish, you would tend to find more Apologists and Abstainers amongst the 15–25 year olds, as the Assimilators are far more likely not to attend Mass regularly. Interestingly, the summary of the official research conducted by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW) in preparation for the Synod (the 'mega youth poll') spoke of two groups similar to Apologists and Assimilators, but did not identify a third 'Abstainer' group. We suggest this is because this group would be far less likely to engage with the self-selecting survey method adopted by CBCEW. An emerging question for all those engaged in pastoral ministry might be how we should best attend to the voices and experiences of those who are more muted about their faith, though this faith may be deeply treasured.

Aspirational altruism

Part of our research looked at the hopes and aspirations of Millennial Catholics, as well as their social engagement.

Similarly to their counterparts in 2009, young Catholics in 2017 aspired 'to be happy', 'to be married or have a partner' and 'to have close friends' as their top priorities. However, offered an identical list of options to select from, the 2017 group ranked 'to help others' far more highly than the 2009 group, with 21% of them seeing this as a top aspiration in their lives (vs 12% in 2009, reflecting a shift from ninth priority aspiration to fifth priority aspiration).

When our questions shifted in focus from aspiration to expectation, this emphasis on helping others was echoed. In 2017, Millennial Catholics most expect to help others, above all other lifestyle options, including 'having close friends', 'being happy' and 'living in a safe environment'. Again, this reflects a shift from 2009, where participants had ranked 'to help others' only as their fifth most likely expectation.

This language of altruism or 'helping others' seems to resonate more amongst Millennial

Catholics in 2017 than in 2009, both in terms of aspirations and expectations. Yet, asked about their charitable activity over the past 12 months, there is no evidence of a parallel increase in having helped others through direct or indirect charity engagement. Indeed, the percentage of young Catholics sponsoring someone who took part in a charity event over the previous 12 months in 2017 was 30% (compared to 54% in 2009); and the percentage taking part in a charity event in 2017 was 25% (compared to 35% in 2009).

In an increasingly challenging and uncertain economic climate, and following an extended period of cutbacks to youth services, the challenge for those engaging in work with Millennial Catholics may not be about cultivating a spirit of altruism, but instead finding new ways to meet their aspirations in this area, without placing additional financial pressures on potentially vulnerable young people.

Millennial Catholics, spirituality and the Bible

As a sacramental tradition, the spirituality of Catholicism is often viewed through attendance and participation in Mass. Three quarters of the Millennial Catholics we surveyed say that they are attending Mass, at least irregularly. Across the whole group, males were more likely to attend Mass than females (82% vs 71%), but on visiting an average Catholic parish, this might not be so apparent as the majority of Millennial Catholics are female.

Around three quarters of all Millennial Catholics said that they had personally had a spiritual experience. One question within the survey offered a list of 14 options to help participants describe these experiences. Analysing these responses, it seems that these young people are using four distinct types of language to articulate their experiences:

- Some use **traditional trinitarian language**, including 'a sense of the presence of God', 'awareness of the Holy Spirit', etc.
- Some use **language of nature and connectedness**, including 'a feeling that you are at one with nature and the universe', 'a sense of being part of something bigger alongside others', etc.
- Some use **supernatural language**, including 'feeling as if somebody or something were trying to communicate with you' or 'something spooky or supernatural', etc.
- Some use **liminal language**, including 'a sense of the presence of an angel', 'a sense of the presence of somebody who has died', etc.

Around half of Millennial Catholics tend towards more traditional trinitarian language in describing their spiritual experiences. Whilst parents, educators and youth ministers might find this use

of language reassuring, it is important to note that in comparison with those using other linguistic modes to communicate spirituality, this group are also less likely to pray on their own, and are more likely to never talk about God or religion with friends or family. Whilst for some of them, 'conventional' trinitarian language may helpfully articulate a present reality, it seems for others it might point to a distance between themselves and a prior spiritual encounter.

Asked about their current spiritual practices, Millennial Catholics emphasise personal prayer/meditation over reading the Bible or other spiritual writings, talking about God with friends or family, and praying with family members.

Four per cent of all Millennial Catholics say that they read the Bible daily, with a further 10% saying they read the Bible a few times a week. Here, as you might expect, there is a strong overlap with other behaviours, with almost half of weekly massgoers saying they read the Bible at least a few times a week (outside of church), whereas almost 70% of those who attend Mass irregularly say they 'never' read the Bible. Here, we could enter into the longstanding debate about whether Bible reading supports other faith practice or vice-versa; but it is clear from the data that there is some intrinsic relationship between the two, and that dialogue between massgoing Catholics and Christians from other traditions around the Scriptures could be an opportunity for mutual upbuilding.

Standing bravely with Millennial Catholics

Following the Synod in October 2018, the summary document invited Catholics and the wider Christian community to 'walk together' by the side of all young people – not just those currently engaged with the church.⁵ Whilst an inclination might be to focus on categorising young people into those who are within the Christian community and those who are outside the Christian community, our assertion is that Millennials tend to subvert some of the rules we may seek to apply to these categories. In doing so, they challenge us to view each individual with inherent dignity and sophisticated (sometimes complex) multilayered approaches to life and faith. As we look to the future, there are certainly challenges ahead in terms of articulating a clear and compelling call to Christian discipleship; but there are also signs of hope awaiting nurture and accompaniment, sometimes in highly unexpected places.

Over the course of this article, I have attempted to summarise some of the most relevant key findings from the *Complex Catholicism* research. You can find a summary report of these findings and other areas which complement and expand these points at www.caminohouse.com. Here you will also find a tool we have developed to help people navigate the findings and apply them using 12 'types' or characters who symbolise major groups of Millennial Catholics we found through the research.



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