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KEEPING FAITH:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON RELGIOSITY
AMONG YOUNG CATHOLICS IN IRELAND

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By

Michael A. Clements

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

Ireland is a country that is well-known for its Catholic heritage. Despite its global perception as a Catholic country, the Emerald Isle has experienced rapid secularization within the last 30 years, during which rates of Church attendance and Catholic self-identification have fallen dramatically. Likewise, the legalization of abortion, gay marriage, and divorce, concepts contrary to Catholic teaching, further reflect the island's departure from Catholic Orthodoxy. Should the Catholic religion have a future in Ireland, it will lie in the hands of its devout youth: a demographic with relatively little representation in the literature.

Using a hybrid interview and survey format, the study at hand explores the reasons young practicing Catholics in Ireland are keeping their faith and their Catholic identity and the various components that make up their Catholic upbringing and spiritual life. The sample consists of 15 practicing Catholics between the ages of 19-29 recruited through snowball sampling and a personal connection in Letterkenny, Ireland. Among the primary findings, the participants cited several reasons for keeping their Catholic faith and identity: they recognized their Catholic roots in that they grew up in Catholic families and in a Catholic society, believed the religion to be true, identified a need for God that they fulfilled through the Church, found satisfaction in their faith after finding dissatisfaction in living a secular lifestyle, and, in some cases, credited the role of peers and role models in helping them grow in their faith.

In dedication to
Christ of the Blessed Sacrament
The heritage of Ireland
&
My loving family,
For supporting me endlessly in spite of
my absence to travel, study, and make this work possible.

This thesis is the culmination of a dream, a vision, and a calling. To all of the individuals and the providence that made it possible, the author wishes to say,

go raibh maith agat

Thank you.

VITA

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INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Ireland is a country that is well-known for being traditionally and culturally Catholic. Nicknamed “The land of saints and scholars,” the Central Statistics Office of Ireland (2017) found that, as recent as 1991, 91.6% of the population identified as Catholic. Similarly, the European Values Survey found that 81% of Catholics in Ireland attended Catholic worship services, called Mass, on a weekly basis in 1990 (Crotty & Schmitt 1998). Likewise, in spirit of a long tradition of pilgrimage and missionary work that preceded the arrival of Christianity to the island (Lydon 1998), Ireland was once a hub for Catholic vocations and a global exporter of clergy. As the *Irish Times* noted, Pope John XXIII commented that “any Christian country will produce a greater or lesser number of priests. But Ireland, that beloved country, is the most fruitful of mothers in this respect” (McGarry, *Faith*, 2018).

In spite of this strong Catholic heritage, Ireland has entered a period of rapid secularization and, as a result, religiosity in the country has changed dramatically. As of 2016, when the most recent Irish Census was collected, 78.3% of the Irish population identified as Catholic: a drop in roughly 13 percentage points compared to 1991. This trend is accelerating, as 84.2% of the population identified as Catholic just five years earlier in 2011 and has since dropped by 6 percentage points. According to the 2016 census, the population identifying as non-religious makes up 9.8% of the population and has grown by 73.6% since 2011 (Central, 2017). In terms of Mass attendance, data for

this variable has not been collected as consistently compared to religious identity as a whole. Nevertheless, as of 2012, only 35% of Ireland's Catholics attend Mass on a weekly basis (Association, 2012), a figure that has dropped by 46 percentage points in nearly a 30-year period (Crotty & Schmitt 1998). Likewise, reflecting this downward trend, the recent visit by Pope Francis yielded a Mass attendance of roughly 135,000 at Phoenix Park in Dublin, which, as Patrick O'Dowd emphasizes in his article in the *Irish Central*, is a stark contrast compared to Pope John Paul II's visit in 1979 which garnered a Mass attendance of over one million people at the same place (2018). Similarly, vocations and the number of clergy members have also been dropping significantly. Maynooth Seminary, which was built to train up to 500 priests (McGarry, 2016), only had a mere 6 new students in 2017 (O'Dowd, 2018). Once an exporter of priests around the world, the Emerald Isle now faces a shortage of priests of its own. Clearly, the religious landscape of Ireland is changing.

Curiously, despite this sudden cultural shift, a Catholic presence still remains among Ireland's current generation of young adults and the demographic has some of the most *relatively* high rates of Church attendance in Europe (McGarry, *Young*, 2018). Although many young people in Ireland still identify as Catholic, their beliefs and their relationship with the Church differ widely compared to their grandparents. The statistics between these two paragraphs have been color-coded for quick comparison. Among elderly Catholics aged 60 and older, 76% report having a spiritual life and 84% believe in a personal God with 67% believing that He entirely governs their lives (Andersen 2010). Most notably, 56% say they are religious according to the teachings of their Church. With all of this in mind, it is not surprising that 90% of Irish Catholics aged 60 and over report

attending Church services on a weekly basis with 98% praying regularly, and 94% believing religion is important in their lives (Andersen 2010).

18-29-year-old Catholics, on the hand, as a whole, have not integrated religion into their lives in the same way that their older counterparts have. Only 50% say that they have a spiritual life and 51% believe in a personal God with 24% believing that God entirely governs their lives (Andersen 2010). In stark contrast to the 60+ demographic, a very low 17% are religious according to the teachings of their Church as they tend to take a more individualistic approach: 67% report being religious in their own way. While 56% attend Mass regularly (weekly or monthly), only 36% attends on a weekly basis; 66% prays regularly; and 63% believe religion is important in their lives (Anderson 2010). Their attachment to Catholicism is there, but just not to the same extent as the generation twice previous.

As we can see, even as obedience to the Church has waned and religiosity has taken a less than primary role in their lives, a Catholic identity among Irish youth is still existent (Andersen, 2010). By and large, however, this demographic of young Irish Catholics is not well-understood, especially among those who take their faith very seriously and practice more actively. Although there is plenty of information regarding overall religious trends in Ireland, the nation's Catholic past, and the decline of Catholic influence and practice on the Emerald Isle, there is limited information regarding why young-adult practicing Catholics in Ireland choose to remain in their faith and the various aspects behind their devout practice. The study at hand seeks to explore these questions and to understand the specific reasons as to why these young Irish women and men

identify as Catholic in spite of this ongoing period of rapid secularization. To the author's knowledge, the study at hand will be the first to address these questions in a qualitative format using an interview method and will thus make a meaningful contribution to the existing literature on Irish religion and spirituality.

METHODS

The study at hand utilized a qualitative approach to answering the research question stated previously. In doing so, the author conducted a series of one-on-one interviews with 15 (M = 10, F = 5) young Irish Catholics using standardized questions. To be included in the study, the participants had to (1) self-identify as practicing Roman Catholics, (2) be native to the Republic of Ireland, * and (3) fall at or between the ages of 18-29: an age range defined by Andersen (2010) in previous research with this demographic. The interviews were recorded on a mobile device for further later analysis. Once the data collection was complete, the author then listened to the interviews again and conducted a thematic analysis of the responses in order to see to what extent (or lack thereof) the participants had common answers. In other words, the author attempted to identify (1) the reasons why young Irish women and men remain religious in the Catholic tradition along with other aspects of their religious backgrounds and perspectives and (2) the degree to which their answers were alike or differed.

In recruiting participants for this study, the author used a personal connection from Letterkenny, Ireland who was part of a sizeable adult Catholic prayer group of

* Defined as having been born or spent 90% of their upbringing in Ireland. Only one participant fell in the latter category.

about 20-30 people. Consenting and qualifying members from this prayer group who met the criteria stated previously made up the initial sample for this project. Snowball sampling was then used to find additional participants, using the social networks of these initial participants as a resource.

Immediately following the spoken interview, the author provided a written survey to the participants. The survey asked the participants to provide their basic demographic information as well as details regarding their Catholic upbringing (such as age, level of education, frequency of Church attendance and prayer, etc.). The purpose of collecting this demographic data was to gain an understanding of the sample's overall background characteristics. A factor of particular focus was level of education. *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality* found that level of education negatively predicted religiosity in Ireland. Similarly, age positively predicted religiosity (Breen & Healy, 2014). Given that these young participants are intrinsically an exception to the trend, it was of curiosity as to whether or not they would also break the trend regarding level of education as a predictor of religiosity. The study at hand found this to be the case: a variable discussed in the results section that follows. A copy of the interview and survey questions can be found in the APPENDIX of this manuscript.

RESULTS

Survey data

During each session, as described in the methods section, each participant would complete a written survey immediately following their spoken interview in order to gain

an understanding of each participants' Catholic and demographic background. Here, the survey data is displayed first so that the reader can get an idea of where the participants are coming from and what their Catholic practice looks like before getting into the thematic analysis of their interviews.

Basic Demographics

The sample comprised of 15 individuals ranging from age 19 to 29 with an average age of 24.47. The sample was predominantly male (10) with relatively few females (5). Despite efforts to create a more balanced sample, the author encountered difficulty in recruiting additional female participants. This may be surprising as a study by Breen & Healy (2014) found that women in Ireland were more religious than men in all age groups both during 1990 and 2011; additionally, in the context of Ireland, women have traditionally been seen as important vectors of the faith from generation to generation (Craven 2010). To the author's surprise, there was an existent perception that men in the area tended to be more involved with their faith than women. However, this idea should not be taken conclusively nor definitively. In other words, it should be taken with a grain of salt. It is very possible that, in reality, there is a more equal participation among men and women in terms of Mass attendance and Parochial involvement if not a higher one among female parishioners. In order to establish such conclusions, much more thorough methods would need to be taken to estimate the demographics of Letterkenny's Mass attendance and parish activities. Such questions, however, were not the focus of the study at hand.

All but one participant provided their city of residence on the survey. Among the participants who did, with the exception of one, all of the participants were from County

Donegal, with half residing directly in Letterkenny. The sample was well-educated, with all of the participants completing secondary school (high school) or their leaving certificate as a couple of participants specified. Additionally, 13 of the 15 participants completed some college or higher, 8 of the 15 had a bachelor's degree or higher, and 2 of the 15 had a master's degree. Such educational demographics are inconsistent with the findings of Breen & Healy (2014) which associated level of education negatively with religious practice; in contrast, the education of these faithful participants was actually quite high. Several of the participants did not provide their occupations, but of the 12 that did, the participants worked in a variety of professional occupations spanning both the medical field and the business world among other disciplines. Additionally, several were currently students.

Catholic & Sacramental Background

All but one of the participants had at least 1 grandparent that identified as a practicing Catholic. 12 of the participants had at least 1 parent that identified as a practicing Catholic and three did not. Essentially, the sample consisted of mostly 'cradle Catholics' and, consequently, all of the participants had received several of the Sacraments[†] during their Catholic upbringing. Not surprisingly, all 15 of the participants had been baptized and had participated in Confession and Holy Communion at some point during their lives and all, with the exception of 1 participant, had received Confirmation. As there were no clergy nor married individuals within the sample, none of

[†] Sacraments. For simplicity's sake, a sacrament can be described as an important Catholic ritual. According to the Catechism, there are seven in the Catholic Church: Baptism, the Eucharist (also known as Holy Communion), Reconciliation or Confession (Stating your sins to a priest) , Confirmation (Blessing with chrism oil completing initiation into the Christian faith and marked by the seal of the Holy Spirit), Matrimony, Holy Orders (ordination into the priesthood or becoming a deacon), and Anointing of the Sick (Blessing with oil given when a person is ill or at the point of death). (Vaticana 1994)

the participants had received Holy Orders nor the sacrament of Matrimony. Interestingly, 4 had received the Anointing of the Sick.

In terms of Mass attendance during their upbringing, with the exception of a participant who left the question blank, all of the participants had attended Mass once a week while growing up. Notably, one participant specified that they attended Mass weekly prior to their Confirmation and then once a year after. Furthermore, one participant also specified that they would attend Mass almost daily during the summers while growing up. In general, participation in a Catholic youth group from age 11-18 was not a major part of the sample's Catholic upbringing as 9 of the 15 participants were not involved with such activities, although, conversely, there were 6 participants that were.

Current Mass Attendance

Like other Christian denominations, Catholics are expected to attend Church services every Sunday; however, most Catholic Churches will offer Mass most if not every single day of the week. Many devout Catholics try to attend week-day Masses in addition to Sunday Mass, but such attendance is not mandatory. In the case of these young Irish participants, without exception, every single participant went to Mass at least once within the last year [2019]. On the survey, the participants were asked to fill in a blank calendar and to mark the days they were certain they went to Mass with an X and to put a question mark (?) on the days they thought they went to Mass but weren't sure if they did. By and large, the participants were certain about their December Mass attendance and the question-mark was used rarely with the exception of one case, which will be discussed momentarily. Two participants had one possible weekday Mass attendance, and another had two. Two participants might have had one possible Saturday

attendance and one participant might have had one possible Sunday attendance.

Regarding the exceptional case, one participant filled the entire calendar with question marks on all Saturdays and Sundays. The participant knew they went to Mass those weekends, they just weren't sure on which day. From here on out, our analysis of Mass attendance will only include the days the participants were certain they attended.

The participants' total Mass attendance for December 2019 was an average of 8.71 times. Naturally, the individual total Mass attendance for the month varied from person to person with attendance as high as having attended Mass 23 times that month to as low as having attended Mass 4 times that month. Median Mass attendance was 7 times. All but one participant stated that they attend Mass once per week; the remaining participant stated that they attend Mass daily. Five of the participants further clarified that they tried to attend additional Masses as well. Every single participant had attended Mass on a Saturday or Sunday during the month of December, with a greater preference for Sunday.

Among those participants who said they attended Mass on other days apart from doing so once a week had kept their word and had attended weekday Masses at some point in December. Monday-Thursday Mass attendance, however, was not very common. The sample as a whole attended Monday-Thursday Mass an average of 1.64 times which translates to a total of 23 attendances spread out among 6 participants. The participant who attended Mass daily attended 13 Monday-Thursday Masses. When this outlier is removed, the number drops to an average Monday-Thursday attendance of 0.77 times among the entire sample. This should not be interpreted as a sign of a lack of faith or

commitment among the participants... much to the contrary! Most of the participants were employed or in school: reasonable obstacles to attending week-day Masses.

What about Friday? Upon visiting Letterkenny, the author learned that it is local custom to attend Mass on Friday evenings and was surprised to find a full-Church: such Friday Mass attendance is simply unheard of in the United States. Whether or not this is representative of Ireland as a whole is not clear. Nevertheless, with this custom in mind, the author decided to analyze this day separately. Given that Friday is still a weekday and that the obstacles of school and employment were likely still present, attending Mass on Friday was not overall common among the participants as they had attended Friday Mass as a whole an average of 0.43 times. Still, it wasn't nonexistent either. There was a total of 6 Friday Mass attendances between 4 participants.

Lastly, December is unique in that it is marked by the Advent[‡] and Christmas season. All but 2 participants had attended Mass on either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day; three participants even attended on both days. New Year's Eve Mass was less attended; nevertheless, 5 participants attended for the holiday. It is possible that the other participants attended on New Year's Day; however, January Mass attendance was not collected.

Participation in Catholic Organizations

Out of all the participants, 13 out of the 15 were involved with Catholic groups or organizations. When asked this question, if they marked yes, they were then asked to list the groups. The most common response was Youth2000, of which, 12 participants were a part. 4 participants similarly claimed involvement with NET Ministries Ireland. Although

[‡] The Catholic Church divides the year into several religious-based seasons known as the 'Liturgical Year.' Advent is the liturgical season prior to Christmas. (Vaticana 1994)

these were the most common answers, the participants were involved in other ways as well. One served on their local parish council and another was a member of a woman's group. A Knight of Columbanus was also in the sample as was a brother from a Catholic fraternity.

Material Attributes of Catholic Practice

Without exception, every single participant owned a Bible, a Rosary, and had Catholic imagery in their home. Most of the participants (10) owned a Catechism[§]; 1 owned a condensed size "penny" Catechism and the other 4 did not own a Catechism at all. It is an unspoken trend, but Catholic drivers around the world have a custom of putting a Rosary on their rear-view mirror. The author has observed this trend in the U.S., Spain, El Salvador, Ecuador, Peru, India, and in Ireland. Out of pure curiosity, the author wanted to see how many of the participants took part in this global trend. As it turns out, quite a few did. 9 of the participants had rosaries on their mirrors and an additional 3 had them elsewhere in their vehicle such as in their armrest. These few participants might have done this with good reason. Letterkenny and County Donegal are located geographically close to the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (U.K.). Given the historical tensions between Catholics and Protestants, one participant explained that driving in Northern Ireland with a Rosary on your mirror runs the risk of getting your window smashed. With that in mind, the participant keeps the Rosary placed elsewhere.

Discernment

[§] Catechism, book that stipulates and summarizes the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Of the five female participants, when asked if they had ever considered becoming a nun, 3 had responded yes while the remaining 2 responded no. Among the 10 male participants, most of them had considered the priesthood at one point. 7 responded yes while the other 3 responded no. Notably, one participant added that while he had not considered the priesthood, he did consider joining a religious order.

While the survey did not ask the participants if they were discerning a vocation (choosing to get married, remain single, joining a religious order or the clergy) the author did ask them if they had attended a discernment event or retreat. However, some participants interpreted this question as *had they attended a retreat in general* rather than *a retreat meant specifically for discernment*. Because this discrepancy wasn't detected until after half of the sample had already been interviewed, this question has been discarded from this analysis. In terms of the future, when asked if they were planning to raise their kids as Catholics, all of them responded unanimously: yes.

Thematic Analysis

Prior to the demographic surveys, the participants completed a spoken interview. Given that most of the questions discussed different topics, the analysis that follows will identify the patterns in the responses of the participants question-by-question.

Take a minute or two and think back starting from your childhood all the way until now. What was your experience like growing up Catholic?

When talking about their Catholic upbringing, the word that came up over and over again among the participants was *normal*, much like the participants in prior research (Craven, 2010). Their upbringing was 'normal' in the sense that most of the participants grew up going to Mass, attending Catholic schools, and in some cases,

praying together as a family. The fact that the word *normal* was used perhaps reflects the cultural significance of Catholic faith and traditions in Ireland. After all, the word implies that doing such things was not an anomaly in their society; if anything, it was typical. Indeed, it was not uncommon for the participants to say comments along the lines of ‘most people in Ireland are Catholic’. For example,

“In Ireland, as a whole, I suppose, for the majority of the population, they are predominantly Catholic, Catholic (sic.). I believe in the last census that the government took in 2011, a little over 75, 76% of the Irish population considered themselves to have a belief in the Catholic Church or are practicing.”

-Participant QL

(see the literature review for the true, official statistics)

Although growing up Catholic was normal for these participants, and most of them said they came from Catholic families, there were a few who felt that their families were perhaps more religious or into their faith compared to others around them:

“So I grew up in, like, a very Catholic family. I’m cradle Catholic. And, probably in Ireland, there’s like, everybody is either Catholic, and the majority is Catholic, or Protestant. But, my family were very Catholic. So, that meant sort of taking it an extra step than just going to, like, Sunday Mass and sitting there. Like, I went to prayer meetings. My mom organized trips to go on pilgrimages to Medjugorje.** So I kind of was pegged as a Holy Joe, if not?”

-Participant U

“It (growing up Catholic) was joyful. A challenge obviously because I think you kinda want to rebel against your parents in terms of, on.. we’d say the Family Rosary at home, ‘*but no one else says the Family Rosary at home, why do we have to do it?*’ and this kind of thing So there was things that you’d done that were probably not of (sic.), not cool compared to the other people. Not cool compared to your neighbors and stuff like that. That was the only challenge. Other than that, it didn’t seem... I didn’t know any better, so it was just something that we’d done...”

-Participant W

** Medjugorje, site of alleged visions of the Virgin Mary and a popular pilgrimage site. The apparitions are still under investigation by the Church (Nash 2017).

Just something that we'd done: in other words, Catholicism was routine in Ireland. This normalcy, however, as we learned in the literature review, did not last forever. In several of the participants' statements, it was apparent that they were witnessing a change in their society:

“When I was younger, I felt very alone. I'd always go to Church and that would be a lot of older people. And you wouldn't, a lot of my friends that I had didn't really have any faith. It was just my family, and it felt very excluded.”

-Participant V

“I was made to go to Mass every weekend, but I quite enjoyed it. Mass was so different back then. Like the crowds that was at Mass back in the day compared to now, it was completely different. Like it was so hard to actually get a seat, you know, compared to now.”

-Participant L

“I suppose I went to school maybe in 1995, so, Catholicism in Ireland was still quite, I suppose good in a way? Like, most of my class at school went to Mass. So, in that way, it was a very positive experience growing up. Then I suppose as time went on, more and more people started to drift away.”

-Participant G

There was an evident loss of faith. Given that the Catholic Church has previously depended on Mass attendance and formal education as formation tools in Ireland (Healy & Reynolds 1985), it is not surprising that many of the participants mentioned that they attended Catholic schools; however, very few of them commented on the quality of their Catholic formation. A couple of the individuals interviewed mentioned that their teachers in these schools were not always Catholic: a circumstance that would reasonably impact their religious formation. With this in mind, in exploring the religiosity of rising Irish educators, a recent study conducted by Heinz et al. (2018) found that among a sample of entrants to Ireland's undergraduate primary initial teacher education programs, 90.4% self-identified as Roman Catholic. While this figure seems very high, only 62.8% of this cohort identified themselves as a religious person and only 46.2% attended Mass weekly;

an additional 17.2% attended once a month: statistics similar to those analyzed by Andersen (2010). In other words, although their Catholic affiliation was high, their practice and religiosity was more limited. Chances are, the participants encountered educators of a similar profile during their Catholic education. Of the two participants that did comment on their formation, they expressed views that came from extreme ends of the spectrum:

“I had a very positive experience growing up Catholic, besides that I grew up in what was a very good faith formation. There was no real judgements that I could see against what I believed in, so it was very helpful as well because we had priests and other members of the community who really supported young people, who wanted to really, not necessarily question their Catholic faith but had questions about their faith. And, and so, for (sic.)... like we'd set up a prayer meeting as well, so that was great for the young people to go to to learn more about their faith and just being supported in their decision to continue to be Catholic.”

-Participant R

“Catholic school, I did my First Communion and Confirmation in primary school, but it was very poor Catholic formation. We have (sic.), I think we have a country that has got teachers that are in Catholic schools but aren't Catholic themselves, so are they Catholic just because they're baptized Catholic? Would be... they're not practicing, so, it would have been a very weak formation in primary school,”

And during this participant's time in Catholic secondary school, they had one good religion teacher but...

“Other than that every single religion class in secondary school was a free-period. So, there was no teacher that was there.”

-Participant Q

While we cannot fairly critique the quality of *all* of the participants' Catholic formation in general, the participant commentary seems to indicate that *some* of the participants grew up with a *possible* disconnect or lack of understanding with their religion, at least to some degree as shown below. For many of these participants, although they grew up with Catholicism, it wasn't until they were teenagers or in their

20's (and in a few cases, very recently) **OR** following a period of having fallen away and not practiced the religion... that they finally connected and got into their faith. In the time beforehand, several of the participants stated that they really didn't understand *or* connect with their faith:

“Well, I never really was into my faith. Like, I never saw, like I never really (sic).. I believed in Jesus but I never actually... think He was there. You know, that kind of thing. Like as an invisible friend as a child, you know, that kind of thing. Like, you know He's there, but...”

-Participant L

“In college, I suppose I wasn't really being Catholic in college. You know, I didn't understand it. Didn't understand the whole thing about cohabitation, budding with people, or no sex before marriage. Just didn't understand what any of that was about or what it means.”

-Participant Q

“For a long time you didn't understand maybe all of it, in terms of the faith kind of end of things. But, yeah, just normal life basically and just was what (sic.) something we'd done and that's what we did. Instructed by your parents basically.”

-Participant W

Just something we did: words we will continue to see many times throughout these interviews.

What does being Catholic mean to you?

This question was interpreted in two ways and the participants gave answers that fell along a spectrum between *what does being Catholic emotionally mean to you?* and *how do you define a Catholic?* For the most part, there was more of a preference for the second interpretation. Despite the discrepancy, there were still common answers among the participants' responses. For many of the participants, being Catholic gave them an identity and a sense of purpose, in the sense that God had a plan for them or in that it

gave them a mission to serve others. In terms of this identity, there was agreement among several participants that being Catholic was more than just identifying as one: to them, it also meant taking a further step by following the Church's teachings and living out the religion. As the participants put it themselves,

“Being Catholic to me means not just saying that you're Catholic. Like, not just having the stamp of it but actually being a Catholic by conviction. So, by actually doing like what you're doing now. Like actually going out there finding out why people are still interested. People who are convicted to go to Mass not because their parents said they have to go... people who want to go to that. People who want to know where did the faith start, why do I believe, why do we believe what we believe. And, I feel like that... that to me is like... what it means to be Catholic and to follow the Lord no matter what. Like, when you've truly find out (sic.) why you believe what you believe and to stand by it and to be 100, like, just to be 100% no matter what anybody says. Like, you know that you're following.. the right, the right thing: following Jesus Christ.”

-Participant V

“Being Catholic to me, I suppose, it means having a faith; having a belief in the Church... but also following the Church's teachings, and the teachings, I suppose, outlined in the Biblical, you know, law, as such, the Ten Commandments. So I believe, you know, if you are attending Mass and you are baptized Catholic, you've gone through the sacramental period of the Catholic Church, that, you you (sic.) are a Catholic, but, I do believe that... you must be practicing it to really consider yourself a Catholic.”

-Participant QL

Along with having a shared identity and a firm intention to practice what they preach, several participants emphasized heavily that being Catholic meant having hope in and having a goal to reach Heaven. This is not surprisingly, especially given that this belief is central to Christianity.

“I have an opportunity to go to Heaven. That's my initial thought, is like, I have a chance to go to Heaven and just be (sic.).. my main goal in life is go to Heaven.”

-Participant W

“[It] Means being part of a family that are all walking towards the same goal: achieving Heaven when we pass away and to live in eternity with Christ.”

-Participant R

Finally, and arguably most importantly, as Christian people, most of the participants’ definition of being Catholic was strongly rooted in Christ in some way, shape or form. In doing so, there was much individual variation as can be observed below. Nevertheless, Jesus was the clear common factor:

“I would say, living like Jesus did: with humility. With love. With respect for everyone else. That to me is what the Catholic is.”

-Participant H

“Oh, it’s my life. Without it, I wouldn’t have a life. I lost my faith for years, and I was lost. I was going down such a bad road Jesus came into my life and, you know, whenever I went astray then from Jesus, I was like... Stuff then, like you know, I wasn’t happy again. But when you bring Jesus back into your life, your life is so so good. You know the difference, so like... without my faith, I don’t have a life.”

-Participant L

“To me, it means, truth. It means that we have the full means of salvation. It means we have everything we need to obtain salvation, namely the sacraments and a real relationship with Christ, as well as a relationship with Christ (sic.), a relationship with His body, which is the Church.”

-Participant Z

“I suppose fundamentally, it’s, I suppose it’s a belief in Jesus. It’s, its (sic.) essence is a relationship with Jesus and Our Lady. You know, it’s, it’s all the beliefs that we see in, like, the Creed, where we believe in the visible and invisible. The communion of saints. I believe in Heaven. I believe in Hell.”

-Participant Q

What are some of the ways in which you practice your Catholic faith?

In practicing their Catholic faith, virtually all of the participants stated that they attend Mass. Most claimed a weekly Saturday or Sunday attendance and even some stated that they try to additionally attend Masses during the week if they can: answers

that are all consistent with the responses provided in the survey portion. Most of the participants ended up describing their prayer life: a related topic but not one that was necessarily intended for this question. As such, many of the participants claimed that they include prayer in their every-day life: an element that will be explored in much greater detail later on in this manuscript. Nevertheless, a brief analysis will be provided here.

For some of the participants, practicing their faith through prayer meant praying in the morning, in their cars, or before meals. Virtually all of the participants included praying the Rosary in their prayer life. Some participants came from families that took part in family Rosaries; others would try to pray it daily or at least once a week and some would pray it while driving. The Angeles and especially the Divine Mercy Chaplet were also important prayers for these participants: a fact that is consistent with their prayer routines described later on in the interview.

Also notable was that for a number of the participants, attending Adoration^{††} was an important element of their Catholic practice and prayer life. In fact, for several of the participants, going to Adoration was just as much a part of their weekly routine as attending Mass was. Many of the participants also practiced their faith through involvement with Youth 2000 and National Evangelization Teams (NET) Ireland: Catholic youth organizations found throughout the country. In addition to these

^{††} In the Catholic Church, the bread (flat host) and wine provided at Communion are believed to be the real-presence of Christ's body and blood, blessed through a process called *consecration*. A consecrated host is often put on the altar in Catholic churches on designated days, during which people can come, pray, and adore Christ in front of His Real Presence. This is known as *Adoration*. (Vaticana 1994)

organizations, several participants also noted that they had found several young Catholic friends or communities as well.

In some shape or form, nearly all of the participants stated that receiving the Sacraments was an important part of their Catholic practice. In doing so, several participants explicitly mentioned that they attended Confession. However, when a participant would say that they received Confession regularly, the self-reported frequency varied from once every two weeks to once a month. In other words, while several participants stated that they would go to Confession, it appears that it is not as ingrained into their routine to the same extent that praying the Rosary or attending Mass is. Investigating the full patterns of Confessional attendance is a question for future research. For now, an article published in *The Irish Catholic* around the same time of the author's visit to Ireland appears to suggest that there has been a resurgence in Confession attendance, particularly among young people:

“Limerick-based Fr Gerard Moloney CSsR said the much talked about ‘demise of Confession’ is ‘slightly exaggerated’. ‘We have heard hundreds here in Limerick over the last few days, of all ages and backgrounds,’ he told *The Irish Catholic*.”

“In Dublin, Fr Bryan Shortall OFM Cap. said he believes that younger people are feeling freer about approaching the sacrament, particularly around Christmas time. ‘Maybe there’s a rediscovery of Confession with a younger generation not having some of the hang-ups that some older people have had about the sacrament. People don’t associate it with being judged, but reconciliation which is great.’ Fr Shortall, parish priest of Priorswood, said.”

Quotes from Kelly (2020)

Given that they all reported attending Mass regularly, it is also reasonable to assume that they are likely receiving Holy Communion on a regular basis as well. Afterall, the Eucharist is considered to be “the source and summit of the Christian Life” as identified by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Vaticana 1994).

Ireland is said to be going through a period of heavy secularization currently. Why have you decided to remain Catholic?

This is perhaps the most important or key question within the interviews. Why are these young Irish Catholics keeping their faith? There was a variety of answers.

Naturally, many of the participants stated that they grew up Catholic (as discussed in detail previously) and believed it was true. Participant Y, for instance said,

“...you believe it and you know *it's the truth* (emphasis added), then why would you turn away from it even... even with everything else with in it going on?”

-Participant Y

It's the truth: a response that reappeared in several questions of the interview. Although the participants were not asked to elaborate on this, there was one participant who did without prompting. For this participant, the Catholic Church's veracity lied in its consistency:

“The world changes. You know, we we see that through history (sic.), the world does change. But, the, you know, Christ never changes. And, knowing that, you know, when they call Christ the rock or whatever, you know, that's, you know... He doesn't, you know He can't be moved, His Church on earth can't be moved. He is, and, although the world changes and we'll see in 200 years time, or 300 years time, a new change in the world or whatever, when something new and the new... who knows? Maybe they'll go back to a more conservative way of looking at things, but... without Christ. But it doesn't really matter. It's without Christ. With Ireland becoming more secular, it's the way the world is going, and, it's the way politics and the human, you know, the way thought is going and ideas are going, but, Christ doesn't change. That's what keeps me in the faith.”

-Participant Z

The most common answer, however, was that, by and large, they remained in Catholicism because they saw unhappiness in the secular world and saw contrasting joy within the Church and their faith. Although there were a few participants who came to this conclusion by observing their peers, there were many participants who actually experienced a secular lifestyle themselves. Surprisingly, there was a high number of

Catholic reverts within the sample: individuals who had grown up with Catholicism, fell away and then returned to the faith. After falling away from the faith (to some degree) and living a secular, less restrained or materially focused lifestyle... or after attempts to live a parallel Catholic and secular lifestyle, the participants grew dissatisfied with their lives and felt they were unhappy. Upon coming back to their roots or learning more about the Catholic faith, they found fulfillment and the happiness they were looking for. As the participants put it:

“I suppose it’s because I’ve seen the destruction in my own family from the secular way of life. You know, cohabitation, you know... no practice of the faith on Saturdays or Sundays. No prayer in the home. And, I’ve seen from friends and from family members where they’ve put their faith in other things, like money and... possessions and things like that. And... you know, they’re so unhappy. You know, so many friends I have they’re just so unhappy and they’re obsessed with social media and how, how they look (sic.). It’s all about their ego and about how they look to the world. And, um, they seem so unhappy, and, I’ve just decided [...] as I have experienced some of that with the way I used to live with that girl, I’ve decided to just remain faithful.”

-Participant T

“I was away for a few years. So I kind of was... I was feeling it very heavy, the fact that everyone was falling away from their faith and it disheartened me quite a bit. But... I kind of realized the further away I got from my faith and the more secular I became, the more... just unhappy, discontent I was. And, and... I kind of had this moment of, just like, I don’t want to be lukewarm in my faith. So I, sort of, went head-first into it.”

-Participant U

“Because I know in my heart that it’s the right thing to do; it’s the right thing to be. And, my Catholic faith has gotten me this far and I’m probably more joyful than my peers who live in the secular way, the secular life. I was caught in between the two for a longtime myself. Especially college trying to live the secular life, I also tried to live my Catholic faith. And, as I’ve said earlier, burning the candle at both ends: and I knew the one end was shining brighter, and I knew one end had more purpose than the other. And so, eventually, over time, the secular candle... was getting smaller and smaller and the, (sic.) my faith candle was getting bigger and bigger I had to cut one out and that was the secular way because it doesn’t give me... it gives you instant joy but it doesn’t give you.. it doesn’t give you permanent happiness.”

-Participant W

Similarly, there were other participants who, without referencing past experiences with secularism, expressed that things apart from their faith could not make them happy:

“Basically because without your faith, you don’t have anything. It’s what I’ve learned. And it’s just, it’s the only thing that, like, really makes you happy.”

-Participant B

“There is nothing in life that could make me more happier. Materialism can’t make me happy. Traveling the world can’t make me happy. It is that relationship with Jesus Christ and with the Church that makes me happy. It makes me the person who I am today.”

-Participant QL

As we will see, finding satisfaction in the Church after a period of self-secularization and the dichotomy between faith and a secular society will be consistent themes in the participants’ answers to the upcoming questions. Also in responding to this question, several of the participants spoke of an intrinsic need for God and that their faith fulfilled it. The underlying message was that, for these participants, faith was a necessity which is why they’ve remained in the Church:

“We have a desire for God, naturally within us. And we’re searching every way to get back, to fill that void. You search for it in secular things or you search for it in God and through the Eucharist and everything. When you find it, you know it. Sometimes you’ll turn away from it but you know deep down, that living the Catholic faith, seems, in your heart, the right way to do it.”

-Participant W

“I suppose you just, you just know, that you’re need (sic).. your need of God and His Mercy. That even though it’s the hard way, there’s so many people out there. It’s just the witness of other people as well, like you’re not the only one. And if they can do it...as long as you’re not alone, you know?”

-Participant G

Indeed, in finding their faith and becoming more comfortable with it, in the same spirit as the previous participant, a couple of other participants also credited the example of others

as being a key factor. For example, this was the case for participant Q who, after exploring various faiths, decided to revert to Catholicism:

“In my search, I saw it to actually search Catholic stuff. Okay, why is it, why is it (sic.) that [I’ve] been reared (*or raised*) in a country that is so-called Catholic, I don’t know the first thing about it. I don’t know the difference between being Catholic and being Protestant. Despite all the Troubles in Ireland, I actually do not know the reason between being Catholic and being Protestant. I didn’t have a clue Once I did meet proper, real practicing Catholics who were trying their best to live out the real virtues of being Catholic, I was blown away by them.”

In summary, in general, the participants have remained Catholic as they grew up with the religion, believe it to be true, have found dissatisfaction in the secular lifestyle, have happiness within the Church, desire to fulfill their need for God, and, in some cases, grew in their faith as a result of Catholic role models. These are the broad trends.

Nevertheless, there were some individual answers among the participants that were unique from their counterparts. For example, one participant had survived a serious car accident and credited Christ in saving them. The participant stated that in knowing what Jesus had done in their life, they decided to get into their faith and revert back to Catholicism. Another participant had experienced hardship throughout their life and cited their faith in helping them get through it. Similarly, another participant commented that,

“I guess it’s one of those things that I’ve found to be, peace with, you know? Like, actual peace. I mean it’s just, to me, with all the things happening in the world, but, like, when you’re in front of the Blessed Sacrament^{‡‡} that’s, that to me was the perfect kind of peace that I felt. So one of the reasons is cause you don’t get any other sense of peace than you do when you’re with Jesus.”

-Participant H

^{‡‡} In the Catholic world, this is another term for the host placed on the altar during Adoration; it is also sometimes used as a synonym for Communion.

Having such devotion to the Blessed Sacrament is not unheard of in the Catholic world; in fact, the author shares it as well. For another participant, however, it was their prayer life that was a contributing factor to their reasoning for remaining Catholic:

“Every time something comes up, I just [...] the Lord and pray and it’s sorted and it’s not necessarily always answered the way that I wanted, but it always turns out to be the right answer. Like, the best from that situation I’ve gotten a lot of ridicule and people like come up to me and be like ‘why do you... what’s the point?’ and all this. For me, like, every time someone else is, there’s an issue in someone else’s family, who don’t have faith or who call themselves Catholic but aren’t or from other faiths, a lot of them will come to me or to someone they know that are in the Catholic faith and ask for prayers. And for me, that’s a big sign of like, why don’t [they] go to this person or that, you know, that type of person for.. for prayers but they’ve come to me and... and they know I’m a good Catholic man and that I’ll pray for them.”

-Participant V

Clearly, the reasons that these young devout Catholics in Ireland have kept their faith is diverse. Nevertheless, we will find that some of these same principles and factors have influenced other aspects of their spiritual life. For instance, their Catholic identity.

Why do you identify as Catholic? Describe your Catholic identity.

The most common answer to this question usually reflected their circumstances:

“I grew up Catholic and believe it to be true.” Again, like in the previous question, although many of the participants stated that they felt Catholicism was the truth, most did not elaborate as to why. Again, this is perhaps a question that requires more prompting and is a point for future research. Indeed, most of the participants cited family ties as their reason for being Catholic: their parents were Catholic and therefore they were too.

Similarly, some of the participants cited cultural reasons as they were born and grew up in a Catholic society. In fact, even a couple of the participants stated that if they had been

born in a society that was predominantly of another faith (such as Protestantism or Islam) they would likely be practicing that faith as well. Such circumstantial explanations for their Catholic identity were the norm in this sample. It's important to note that while a few of the participants further qualified that although they came from Catholic families and cultures, they felt that they were now Catholics by choice. Nevertheless, they still recognized their cultural and familial ties to Catholicism. Below is a sample of some of the circumstantial responses:

“I identify as Catholic, like, mainly just cause, like, that's what I grew up in. Like, it's my parents' faith. It's just what I've been surrounded in my whole life.”

-Participant U

“I am just Catholic because I am. I can't tell you why. I'm only Catholic because my family are Catholic.”

-Participant M

“Well, because I am! Basically, I was born into a Catholic family. I was baptized. I was brought up in the Catholic faith. I was told... more so, like I know in Ireland you're told you're supposed to go to Mass rather than why sometimes. And, so there was there was (sic.) obviously times where I wasn't too sure why I was Catholic or what was the purpose of being Catholic. Sometimes that just comes with age and with knowledge.”

-Participant W

“Well I suppose I was just born a Catholic, like. I never really like questioned that, or I never really... I've just kinda, known it to be true. And it's... like you just hear all other religions and like, I don't know. Like with Protestants, like it's... they have the certain things that we have, but they don't have it fully. ”

-Participant B

“Everywhere you go, there's Churches. There's priests. You know what I mean? It's just something you haven't really thought about. It's just something that you're just.. You kind of take it for granted a little bit at times, but it's just something that's always been there and you wouldn't have it any other way.”

-Participant O

Although the participants had a variety of reasons as to why they continued practicing their Catholic faith (as discussed in the previous question), the participants did not express much depth as to why they identified *as Catholics particularly* apart from family or cultural ties as evident in the quotes above. Interestingly, few participants cited theological reasons for identifying as Catholic. Circumstantial reasons were more common. This difference could perhaps be explained by a *possible* Catholic formation among the participants with limited apologetics training; however, without thoroughly studying the Catholic curriculum taught in Catholic schools throughout County Donegal, we cannot make this conclusion. Furthermore, we have further reason to question this explanation. It must be said, it's tempting to jump to this conclusion, especially when the general responses are put in contrast with a more theologically based answer:

I identify as Catholic because I believe that my faith is universal. And... when I say that I'm Catholic I'm saying I'm professing that, that the faith I have is truly universal. And it's truly one. And it's truly holy and it's apostolic. And it's Catholic. So, like, being that means to me, that, when I read the Bible, and I read the Acts of the Apostles, I believe that whatever that deposit was, what the Church was then, that Church morphed through Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit to grow and flourish as a body does, into something that Christ wants on Earth, as people. So when I say Catholic I say I'm part of that as people, the people of God and the New Covenant. And it goes, like, worldwide. You know, you're making a statement.

In the quote above, the participant cited the Marks of the Church (One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic), hints at the Deposit of Faith, the universality of the Church, and the existence of the New Covenant. Simply put, the participant cited several concepts from Catholic theology. This may not have been an accident. The participant above was a self-identified Catholic convert. During their interview, this participant stated that they had done a significant amount of reading on Catholic teachings and history which might

explain why the participant cited theological reasons for their Catholic identity rather than family ties. Having done such independent research may also be a product of another factor: having spent a significant amount of time with people from other Christian denominations. It is possible that in such encounters, the participant was often asked questions challenging Catholicism with respect to other forms of Christianity that led the participant to research answers and to have them on hand. In a similar light, it is possible that the other participants may not have had this particular form of interfaith experience, which is why they did not give these answers readily when asked why they identified as Catholic. This could lead to another hypothesis, and a more likely one that could explain the difference between the theological and circumstantial answers.

Again, it may seem tempting to assume that the participants have not received much apologetics training in their formation or in their faith journeys. But jumping to this conclusion and assuming the participants are limited in their knowledge of their faith would be a *grave* mistake. In other portions of the interview, several participants expressed confidence in their knowledge of Catholicism and even referenced teaching moments in which they clarified a Catholic doctrine to people who had misconceptions about the faith. This may indicate that there might not be an apologetics formation-gap at all. Alternative to the formation-gap hypothesis, it is possible that the participants had been taught those same concepts provided by the Catholic-convert, but as a result of growing up in a culturally Catholic society, they did not have a need to explain what sets Catholicism apart from other faiths on a regular basis and to, therefore, commit those concepts to memory. Had they had a greater need to defend their faith in conversation with other religions, they might have had this knowledge readily on hand and,

consequently, would have become an important part of their Catholic identity. As further evidence of this *defense hypothesis*, the participant below had also had high interaction with people from other denominations, leading the participant to cite Apostolic Succession^{§§} as one of their reasons for identifying as Catholic:

“And I’ve read so much about all the Popes down through the years. And I found each Pope leads back to the original. The original place where it all started with our Lord and the Catholic Church. And.. I just know it to be true and that’s why I

stay the way I am. I know it to be true in my heart. That’s why I’m Catholic.”

-Participant T

In further testing this defense hypothesis, it would be interesting to follow up with these participants and to ask them why they believe God exists and to see how thorough their responses are. Given that Ireland has been secularizing and has seen increasing atheism (Central 2017), the participants have likely had to defend their reasoning for being religious in the first place much more often than what they believe sets Catholicism apart from other Christian denominations or other religious faiths. It should be noted that regardless of if the answer the participants provided consisted of a theological or a circumstantial response, no one kind of answer is superior to the other. These two ways of answering were simply a pattern that was evident, and the author has provided two hypotheses that might explain it: one of which he clearly favors over the other.

Regardless of the content in their answers, the faith of these participants and their Catholic identity is very real and very *genuine*. Most of the participants are very involved Catholics and are leaders in their parishes. Like in the previous question, several of the

^{§§} Catholic belief that the authority of the Church hierarchy descends from the original Apostles. In the case of the Pope, back to St. Peter and Christ. (Vaticana 1994)

participants stated that they valued the community that their faith gave them and that their faith called them to live in a way that reflected it; for instance, keeping a good moral disposition and avoiding behaviors (like gossiping) and taking part in more prosocial activities such as helping others. Likewise, when circumstantial reasons were primarily given for their Catholic identity, the participants often stated, in some way, that they had an interaction with or a love for their faith or a relationship with God. In fact, two of the participants emphasized that they saw themselves as a son of God. As one put it, it is *this* that is “the highest honor.”

How do you currently experience the Church right now? Is it an overall positive or negative experience?

This question was inspired by the work of Craven (2010) who conducted a study on Catholic and Protestant women in Ireland. Specifically, she asked her participants if they believed they had a positive or negative experience growing up in their religion. Although her question slightly differs from the current one in that it explored attitudes toward religious upbringing as opposed to a current experience of the institution, it is interesting to compare the results. In her all-female sample, only 37.5% of Catholics had reported experiencing the religion positively; meanwhile, in the current study, all of the participants reported experiencing the Church positively *to some significant degree*. Notably, unlike in Craven’s study, our sample was mostly male, perhaps reflecting a *potential* overall gender-difference that may exist in experiencing the Church. It is worth noting, however, that the female participants in this study did not hold the staunchly negative views of Catholicism that Craven’s participants did. For example, a 24-year old participant from Craven’s (2010) study stated:

“Confirmation and communion were big days out for us. Apart from that, my childhood was marked by restriction and killed. Being Catholic affected everyone, everything you did was wrong. I hated Mass.”

Our participants had a much different perspective. In general, the participants in the current study were currently experiencing the Catholic Church either positively or a mix of positively and negatively, but none stated that they were experiencing the Church exclusively negatively. Regardless of their position, like in other parts of the interviews, most of the participants recognized that the Church had been involved in various scandals in Ireland and that there had been a noticeable drop in practice of the faith:

“When I go to mass in [town], on the weekends, I remember when I was young, it was always very very difficult to get a seat in a pew; it was very busy. When you go to Mass now, on a Saturday or Sunday in [town], it’s... really easy to get a seat, because, a lot of people have fallen away from the practice of their faith.”

-Participant T

“I think there’s, there’s things that have happened in the Church in this country and in other countries as well that people have turned away from the church because of several several (sic.) things. Suppose there was a certain violation of trust. Suppose that’s the big thing for a lot of people that I talk to.”

-Participant M

“Like the scandals that went down It’s frightening the way it was covered up It’s sad, it’s really sad because a lot of people have probably lost their faith, and you know, because of it.”

-Participant Q

In such circumstances of falling affiliation and a loss of trust in the Church, it may be puzzling as to how there could be a positive experience in the Church to any extent: a detail which will be discussed shortly. After all, abuse, particularly child abuse, is not a negligible occurrence especially given recent global-societal efforts to encourage survivors and victims of abuse to speak out and to tell their story. In understanding the participants’ responses, it should be clear that the participants were not asked directly nor

specifically about their opinions or views of the scandals nor the abuse crisis. When the participants did bring up such topics, there was general recognition that what had happened was a bad thing, as can be seen in Participant Q's remarks previously. In a judicious manner, much like the participants in Craven's study, several participants noted that the actions of a few managed to tarnish the reputation of many people and of the Church. It is worth stating clearly, **no participant justified the actions of abusive priests.** Indeed, the scandals have been the cause of anger and heartbreak for Catholics all over the world, including the author. It is of his opinion that there are few Catholics who do not also share in this pain.

So, in what ways were the participants experiencing the Catholic Church positively then? Of those who experiencing the Church exclusively positively, several saw the Church as a place to encounter God's grace and the Sacraments. Naturally, Catholic priests play an indispensable role in ensuring the sacraments are accessible. The local priests in Letterkenny appear to have a good, positive reception: an opinion shared by the author. As participant V stated,

“And particularly in this parish, we have three amazing priests. Like, very very very strong priests. Very intellectual priests. Very informative. And understanding. Every priest we seem to get in has been a blessing on this parish.”

Several of the participants who were experiencing the Church positively, consistent with the responses to the previous questions, also felt this way because of the community they had encountered through the Catholic Church:

“I suppose for me, I have to say overall positive experience. I suppose a majority of my friends now would be, Catholic. Or I would have met through retreats or prayer groups or NET Ministries. So, I suppose I'm surrounded by a majority of Catholic friends, who in that way you're almost in like a little bubble. You know? So it makes it easier in a way than when you go back to my work setting where... I don't know... I work in a [workplace location] with say 20, 25 people. But I

don't know if many of them are practicing Catholics. I don't know. Like maybe 1 or 2? If even."

-Participant G

"I think it's quite a positive experience and I think it's becoming a more positive experience. I know particularly in Ireland in the last number of years there's been a lot of questions asked for the Church, but I feel like it's becoming more and more welcoming and they're finding new ways to welcome younger people back into their faith in particular."

-Participant R

As notable, here and in responses to previous questions, much credit has been given to Youth 2000 and NET Ireland for reinvigorating the faith among Ireland's young Catholics and for bringing the community together.

Although many of the participants were experiencing the Church positively, there were several who felt they had a mixed reception of the Church in the sense that they were experiencing it both positively and negatively. The reasons that they were doing so varied individually:

"It is very 50/50 for me. Like, I think that where I am right now, I'm so blessed: I have, like, a lot of community here in [town] but there's not a lot of community anywhere else. And I found that like... just sometimes, like, the older generation can be stuck in their ways and they're not willing to, like, see change and they can sort of drive away, like, young people. And like, they're not willing to reach out to people or just to evangelize. Sort of stuck in their ways, but then on the other hand, I see a lot of goodness in people and a lot of like... I... I don't think that like the Church is, like, fallen away or like dead yet. I still see a lot of great, good things happening, especially coming from [place]. I still see a lot of goodness in Ireland and, like, a lot of hope for the Church."

-Participant U

"I think it's a bit, a bit of both. I find it, like, people aren't reverent. At all. You know unfortunately, they don't realize, like, this host... is, like, Jesus's body. You know, it's His heart, He's given us His heart. But particular, just receiving Jesus in His (sic.), in their hands. You know, they're not being reverent."***

-Participant L

*** The alternative to receiving on the hand is receiving on the tongue. Although both methods are approved by the Church, there is controversy within the devout Catholic world over how Catholics ought to receive. Receiving on the tongue tends to be associated with reverence and with Catholic orthodoxy.

“If I’d be honest, I have a very mixed view of the Church right now. I have, like, a fantastic view of Jesus; a fantastic view of Our Lady. I... This sounds really bad but I don’t really... I think the Church is broken. It’s so broken. I think it’s so torn as well. Like, you see lots of different teachings that are just like the opposite to each other It’s a huge organization. It’s doing so much good Like free education in developing countries. Different ways, I suppose, it’s hard for us, like Ireland and The States to see, to see... it’s to see that because we are from countries of privilege...”

-Participant Q

As we can see, with such diversity of opinion, it’s not possible to make one blanket statement about how young practicing Catholics are experiencing the Church. In a simple summary, much like anything else, there are many who report good experiences. There are others who have concerns. Nevertheless, regardless of their differing feelings and perspectives about the Church, they all share a common faith: and that is what brings them together.

To what degree is being Catholic part of your Irish identity?

It was often thought throughout Irish history that to be Irish and to be Catholic basically meant the same thing (Greeley 1981). Andersen (2010) highlights such synchrony between Irish and Catholic identity:

“Why, then, are they religious at all? Why have they not sought alternative ways of being spiritual? If we follow Hervieu- Léger’s idea of religion as a chain of memory and Durkheim’s notion of religion as a community that is bound by a shared belief of what is sacred, we can also understand why young Irish people continue to identify themselves as Catholic—because it gives them a sense of belonging to a community and provides them with a way of feeling connected to the Ireland of the past. The Irish and Catholic identities are closely intertwined, even for people who do not practise frequently; 98 per cent of Irish Catholics say they are proud to be Irish, and, in this instance, there are no significant age differences.”

Our participants, however, tell a slightly different story, indicating that the relationship between being Irish and being Catholic is much more nuanced than it is often

given credit for. Consistent with Andersen's ideas, for about 60% of the sample, being Catholic was seen as an important part of their Irish identity. The remaining 40% of the sample, however, saw their Catholic identities and their Irish identities as separate entities or, as was the case for one participant, they did not fully separate them nor fully put them together. In other words, a notable portion of the sample did not automatically put the two identities hand-in-hand.

Still, most of the participants acknowledged the important role the Catholic Church played in Irish history and its influence in their society, which is likely why there was still a majority of the participants that associated and put the two entities together. Several brought up the missionary work of St. Patrick and Irish priests abroad; others discussed the Troubles and the colonial period during which Catholicism was persecuted in Ireland, the need they had to fight for their faith, and how religion served as a unifying force. One participant, somewhat inadvertently, explained just how much Catholicism was intertwined with Irish society:

“Even in our symbols that we would use, even government symbols where it would be... the harp still is the official symbol, but shamrock would be there too (sic), you know what I mean? Even in things like that; the flag's... the flag's based around Christianity. You know, it's based around peace between the greens, Catholic, native Irish Catholics, and then orange is Protestant. White is the peace between them Years ago, like, even it was part of our identity in (Gaelic) Football Like that was kind of the biggest sport here. And even the stadium in Dublin was given to the association by the Catholic Church. So our sports would be influenced by it. Like the trophy was based on the [Proper Irish term] Chalice which was the chalice for Mass But the G.A. maybe 30 or 40 years ago, or on Sunday, they would have been.. they didn't play the national anthem. But before, they would have played Faith of Our Fathers. You know what I mean? Because everyone was the same.”

-Participant Y

Other participants too referenced a time in which most people in Ireland were Catholic and when these identities did go hand in hand. Nevertheless, there was still

disagreement among the participants as to whether or not this was still the case and views from both ends of the spectrum were expressed:

“As an Irish person, the Church has always had... the Catholic Church has always had a strong, strong roots within the history of Ireland (sic). Being Irish and being Catholic show, I think for me, it makes me rooted in my national background.”

-Participant Z

“I think it’s very intrinsically linked. Being Irish and being Catholic for me. Particularly, because we fought for years with other countries coming in and telling us we couldn’t be Catholic and we couldn’t practice our Catholicism. That, I think there is something engrained in the Irish identity that, because we had to fight for our faith, it means all the more to us. So, to me in particular, I would definitely associate the two and linked quite closely.”

-Participant R

“When you would have been younger, it would have been very like, real part of your, like, Irish identity. Like, it kind of went hand-in-hand. Because, we were like, I don’t know, then... well, I suppose going way back then, like St. Patrick had to come and banish the snakes so we wouldn’t have been that... Catholic, I suppose back then, but like, we would have then after that. **But now I feel like it’s gone completely. Like, the... the state and the Church are like separated from each other now.**”

-Participant B

“Separate, my religious identity with my identity as an Irish person as a whole because I personally think it would be unfair to say, you know, Joseph next door, he’s Irish but we just automatically must presume ‘Catholic.’ I try to separate my Irish identity with my religious beliefs. So, I do consider myself Irish, I do consider myself practiced Catholic (sic.), practicing Catholic, but, at the same time, I separate those ideas. But, again, that’s just me.”

-Participant QL

To the contrary, it’s not just that participant:

“I don’t think we’re a Catholic Country anymore. Being Irish now doesn’t mean you’re Catholic at all. In fact, like, the Church just gets an awful bashing here.”

-Participant Q

Despite these differences, there was general acknowledgement that the religious landscape in Ireland was changing and that the country was now much more secular. It

may seem contradictory that there would be general acceptance that Ireland was relatively less religious compared to the past while also having disagreement over whether being Catholic and being Irish were intertwined. A possible explanation for this could be that the words “Catholic” and “Protestant” appear to have a double meaning in Ireland. Not only can they serve as signifiers of religious affiliation, but again, they also appear to be *sometimes* used as terms of ethnic identity:

“A lot of times here in Ireland you have Irish surnames, and you’ll be able to tell straight away that person is Catholic, that person is not There’s Catholic names and you know there’s protestant names. There’s certain surnames would be one or the other (sic.)”

-Participant M

“My dad is protestant, but he was secular so he didn’t participate in religion. My mom is Catholic, nominally...”

-Participant Z

This phenomenon is perhaps a product of the colonial period when people were differentiated along religious lines as reflected in the British penal codes that prohibited Catholic and Protestant intermarriage and limited the land rights of Catholics (Akenson 1941). Such religious differentiation, and particularly Catholic affiliation, became a major component of Ireland’s national identity (Akenson 1941; Greeley 1981; Healy & Reynolds 1985). An ethnic use of the term ‘Catholic’ would perhaps explain why, despite the ongoing secularization in Ireland and the widespread grievances toward the Church,

“Most people identify as being Catholic still. I think in the last census 70% of Irish people were still Catholics, but, the percentage is actually practicing Catholics has gone way way down (sic.). Gone completely almost. But it’s, well not completely, but it’s just a lot weaker than it had been.”

-Participant W

Indeed, through informal interactions with people in Ireland, it was not uncommon for individuals to reference or to identify themselves as “non-practicing

Catholics.” In fact, Heinz et al. (2018) in their study on religiosity among Irish Catholic school teachers identified the term as a distinctive demographic, providing further evidence that the term *Catholic* is not always an identifier of religious affiliation in Ireland. In the same spirit, in an analysis by Andersen (2010), there were times in which Catholics in Ireland were, perhaps unintentionally, referenced as an ethnic rather than a religious group. For example, data was cited that stated that 3% of Irish Catholics identified as atheists. Given that a belief in God is central and indispensable to the Catholic faith, it is not possible to be both Catholic and an atheist. To be a Catholic Atheist is to be *culturally* Catholic: reflecting, again, the cultural, ethnic significance that the term can carry.

While it cannot be said with certainty whether or not the participants were using the term in one way or another, this may explain the apparent paradox that was evident. One thing that can be certain, however, is that many of their participants were both proud of their faith and proud of their country: something that was truly admirable.

“Ask my girlfriend ‘I’ve never met someone so proud to be Irish and Catholic.’”

-Participant V

Is your family supportive of your Catholic faith?

For the most part, most of the participants said they came from families that were supportive of their Catholic faith, at least to some degree. While the author did not explicitly ask which family members this support came from, more often than not, the participants stated that this support came from their parents or otherwise from another member of the family. As can be seen in the analysis from the written survey portion of the interviews, most of the participants’ parents were practicing Catholics themselves and

would offer support in a variety of ways. For one participant, this included parents giving rides to prayer meetings. For three of the participants, this support included praying the Rosary together. Another participant noted their mom would go with them to Adoration if invited. In other words, several participants stated that their parents provided support by either practicing their Catholic faith with them or by facilitating the practice of the faith in some shape or form.

Several of the participants credited their parents for instilling in them a strong faith. There were a few participants, however, whose parents were not practicing Catholics themselves. In this scenario, their parents would typically tolerate their son or daughter's beliefs even if they did not share them nor agreed with them. On the other extreme, some family members were not tolerant and would implicitly or explicitly ridicule the participant's beliefs. Although the researcher did not ask about the religiosity of the participants' siblings, several commented on theirs. Of the participants who mentioned siblings, about half had siblings that were still into their faith; half did not. Although there were exceptions, by and large, the participants felt that their families were supportive of their faith. This is not surprising as previous longitudinal research by Gunnoe and Moore (2002) identified that having supportive religious mothers was a predictor of young adult religiosity. Given that the participants cited general family support, there is a reasonable likelihood that this was a trait that they shared.

Are your friends supportive of your Catholic faith?

Just like with their parents, most of the participants stated that their friends were supportive of their faith. Not surprisingly, a good number of the participants stated that they had friends from the practicing Catholic community and naturally those friends were

very supportive of their Catholic faith. Of course, most of the participants also had friends from outside the practicing Catholic community. In general, the participants stated that these friends usually respected their beliefs, would ask them questions about their religion, or would otherwise not really care. On occasion, there would be a participant who experienced the rare individual that would argue about their religious beliefs, but this was the exception and not the norm.

Although most of the participants' friends were supportive of their faith through tolerance or shared Catholic affiliation, there were two participants whose friends were not supportive of their faith. One was the participant that converted to Catholicism: their peers from the denomination that they left did not support the decision and confronted them about it. Another participant likewise also lost their friends when they decided to get deeper into their faith. Neither appeared to have regretted their decisions. While most of the participants appear to encounter tolerance for their faith from their friends, clearly, for some, becoming Catholic had a cost.

Why do you think young people are leaving Catholicism?

Among the perceived reasons as to why young people are leaving Catholicism, the most common answer was the media. The participants, collectively, discussed two ways in which the media has lead young people to leave the Church. First, according to the participants, the media promotes lifestyles and ideologies that are contrary to Church teaching. As one participant put it,

“All sorts of every type of sin promoted in those shows, and it’s kind of normalized. And, a lot of young people watch those shows; so they’re influenced and I think they see the Church then as maybe something that they’ll, obviously the Church doesn’t agree with those types of things. It doesn’t teach those. So

people then end up moving away from the Catholic faith or moving away from their Christian roots or beliefs and they're moving towards a more secular (sic.).”

-Participant T

In other words, from the participants' perspective, the media has made behaviors contrary to Church teaching acceptable which has consequently lead young people to abandon the Church since it rejects these ideas. For a few participants, they felt the government also had a role in doing the same as well. Second, the participants stated that the media often smears and reports on the Church negatively. As these participants explain:

“And then the fact of the media, how they twist everything and make... make the Church seem to be like hypocrites and make the Church, like, a lot of its priests and stuff out to be pedophiles and stuff right there.. which is there and completely wrong. But they're saying that's all the Church is. You know, they only have one view of the Church and that it's bad. And that they do no good and that, everyone involved in it is crazy.”

-Participant V

“The media has a huge part to play in it. I think the media is just poisonous towards it, towards the Church. They have a constant, like, stuff about the Church so it has become unpopular to be Catholic.”

-Participant Q

The author himself noticed this negativity bias toward the Church in the Irish media when first beginning the literature review for this project last summer. Articles damming the Church were very easy to come by and were found in overflowing abundance. Articles portraying the Church positively, on the other hand, were virtually nonexistent.

In a similar way, many of the participants felt that another reason young people were leaving the Church was because “the world” was moving further away from what the Church teaches. Again, while the exact intended meaning of this phrase for every participant cannot be known for certain, this term is often used among Catholic circles as

an analogy for a cultural acceptance of excess sex, drugs, drinking and related behaviors and a focus on money and materialism. Simply put, the participants perceive young people as listening to and choosing the world, its lifestyles and ideas over the Church. For example,

“Nowadays there’s such a separation between the Church and the world. Like the gap has become very big. So, you can’t really have both. Well, you can’t really have both to a degree, because certain things in the Church don’t match with things in the world, so you have to take a stance. Or, you have to reject certain things. Maybe, things that your friends are doing, so, if you have to reject those things, it might be comfortable (possibly meant to say uncomfortable). And the Church, I suppose, has never changed. It always sticks to what it has said and the world is moving so far away from that and, like, I suppose with the advances in technology, and, people, young people look to these things for happiness. The Church doesn’t always agree with what the world says so, in that way, you either leave the Church or leave the world, you know, and the world is more appealing I suppose. You have to take more of a stance to come back to the Church, you know. So in that way, it’s harder. So, going with the world is easier because everyone is doing it.”

-Participant G

As a couple of participants identified and implied, such tendency to choose the world and abandon the Church is facilitated by the fact that the Church has the perception of having many rules. For one participant, such guidelines are ‘hard-core fact’ that people are reluctant to accept. For the other, focusing on the Church’s rules has lead people to overlook what the Church actually teaches:

“TV and different things like that would depict that life is a lot more fun and a lot easier. You don’t have rules to follow. And I feel like, maybe they feel like the Catholic Church has too many rules or [is] too restrictive. They don’t see what the Catholic Church is actually trying to teach which is to have self-worth and value, yourself, cause you’re made in God’s image.”

-Participant R

Bottom line: the participants perceive the world and the Church following different paths and moving away from a synchrony of thought that once existed. For several participants, however, this helped them strengthen their faith in Catholicism. For

them, the Church does not change and draws a hard line and takes a hard stance: traits that they valued. However, a few participants felt this was a disadvantage as, in their view, it puts the Church out of touch with Irish society. Such differing views on the role of change in Catholicism should not be surprising. The degree to which change should be permitted within the Church has always been controversial. For that reason, within the world of Catholicism, there is a group of Traditionalist Catholics who reject the changes to the Mass instituted by Vatican II^{†††}. Such Catholics reject the new Mass and instead take part in the old version that was universally given in Latin prior to the Vatican council. Because of such deviations, they believe that anyone that follows the teachings of the Church post-Vatican II is no longer part of the true Catholic Church, including the clergy, and that their Eucharist or Holy Communion is invalid (Pivarunas). Clearly, controversy over change is not unheard of in the Catholic world.

And, sadly, neither are the scandals. Another common answer as to why the participants believe young people are leaving Catholicism was the abuse crisis and how the Church handled such scandals. As an unfortunate global phenomenon within the Catholic Church, it is sadly not surprising that this answer came up once again. One participant stated,

“I think loads of people have left the Church because of the abuses in the Church. I think to do with that (sic.). I think people are failing to see that the Church and God are kinda separate things. Like that the Church is run by people. They can be flawed and they’re humans and they sin and they be making mistakes (sic.) But they’re blaming God for those failures which really shows the responsibility that’s on priests and, you know, when something goes wrong for them, you know, it really affects more.”

-Participant Q

^{†††} Vatican II, world council of bishops held in the 1960’s (Whitehead 2019) that established significant reforms in the Catholic Church and made various adjustments to the Mass such as shifting its language from Latin to the vernacular (Stravinskas 2019).

Indeed, when people look up to their priests and religious leaders only to learn that they have committed atrocious acts, it is no wonder people lose their faith. People in these positions truly have a responsibility to ensure that they live not only lives of example but also to make sure that such abuses never happen again. The priesthood is a calling from God. With that in mind, people will not make the distinction.

Lastly, another common pattern in several responses of the participants was the need to explain *why*: an idea touched on earlier in the interviews. Many of the participants felt that young people leave the Church because they have a misunderstanding of the Church and don't actually know what it truly is. For example, as participant W put it,

“Because they're not taught Catholicism. They don't know what it is. And they're being fooled into thinking that the world is their god and that they are god themselves. But they don't know what Catholicism is, they don't know what the faith is because they haven't been taught it. Because, for many years, the faith was just handed down. It wasn't taught; it was just, this is what you do: you go to Mass. That's all you do: you go to Confession, you say a Rosary. That's it. Like, you're just told you do it. You weren't told why....”

In other words, the participants implied that there is a need to better explain to young Catholics what the Church teaches, where it's coming from, and why they do what they do so that way they have this understanding when deciding their opinions on Catholicism and determining what their religious beliefs are.

If they do stay, why do you think young people remain Catholic?

“It's probably a combination of things. Probably their parents and because then they've probably entered into certain areas like prayer groups and so on and things like that and Sunday Mass or whatever it may be. They've realized that there's great contentness or happiness or some sort of spiritual awakening they've experienced or whatever it may be. That probably is what has told them to stay.”

-Participant M

It never ceases to amaze the author at how a participant can, very much without knowing, provide a statement that summarizes the perspectives of the entire sample. As a whole, the participants provided a variety of reasons that they *perceived* as to why young Catholics choose to remain Catholic. Much like in their responses as to why they decided to remain in the faith themselves, many of the participants said that finding community was likely a reason why young people stay in the faith, especially if their friends are involved. As these participants put it:

“I feel like a lot of the people who do decide to remain Catholic had some sort of experience in a faith-filled environment which included other young people who kind of have had a similar experience. They find a community of people who are like actually we’re willing to live by the laws God’s given us and the.. live our lives the way God has asked us to. And I feel like if they have the support and the.. the love from other young people, they find it easier to stay. I know for myself, because I found such a good group of friends and a good friend base, and faith, faith-base, particularly my time in three different events, that’s what encouraged me to keep going.”

-Participant R

“Maybe they’ve had an influence from a friend or a peer. Maybe they... like someone has been an example to them where... they’ve given them hope or helped them out in a certain sense.”

-Participant G

In finding this community, a couple of the participants further remarked on the quality they perceive in their friendships among Catholic circles:

“I would say some of the reasons I still remained. Because of the community; they’re like so welcoming. They’re, they’re just... there’s just more... everyone there, you know, there’s no sense of division. You’re just happy, joyful people (sic.). I know you can get that outside as well, but, true to what they believe in.”

-Participant H

“For me, when I was... I was always in the faith, but then for making it my own, I was at a retreat and I seen like all these people just smiling, laughing and chatting. People, you know, when you always have it, they change groups and societies,

and you wouldn't, say, put that person being friends with that person. But with them, there was none of that. It was just, people chatting to people. There was no, like, splits in groups and, obviously you have your cliques and stuff but... none of them was... like in my school, say sports people, would never talk to people who play chess. You know, like in that kind of way. Whereas there, people were joyful. They were happy, and yes there was problems and issues, but like they would go up and chat to people and I think... when you get into it and the joy that it brings, you're actual able to... like we go to pubs and sit and talk about Jesus, you know, to each other. And it's really really good."

-Participant V

The insights of the participants makes sense: if young Catholics are in an environment where they feel their faith is accepted and to where they can share in it and participate in it with their peers, it's reasonable to infer that they would be more likely to stick with it. Indeed, previous research has found that having religious friends at age 16 is thought to be a predictor of religiosity later on in young adulthood (Gunnore & Moore 2002). The commentary provided by the participants indicates that perhaps the effects of such peer support are, in reality, ongoing.

It is interesting to note, as illustrated above, that several of the participants commented on the happiness that they've found among Catholic circles. But one participant challenged this idea directly:

"I don't want to give the stereotypical answer of zeal, because of joy and all this kind of stuff. Because sometimes, sometimes being Catholic can involve a lot of suffering especially in this culture right now where you feel really isolated for being Catholic so it can feel really joyless at times. It can feel isolating."

To be sure, there are many young Catholics who experience joy in the Church; however, the participant expresses feelings of loneliness as a result of their faith, reflecting the difficulties young Catholics can face when they don't have supportive community or friendships. This participant's remarks also reflect the change that has occurred regarding religiosity in Ireland. Where before the participant would have found

themselves in what was once known as “The most Catholic country in the world” they now feel isolated because of the very fact that they practice Catholicism. Given that this participant was not from Letterkenny, it may also indicate a difference in religiosity that may exist between different parts of Ireland.

The participants also identified additional perceived factors in Catholic youth remaining in the faith. The quotes that follow are united by a common theme. Observe:

So I think everyone has, like a piece missing within them [...] that only the Lord can fill. And I think everyone is constantly looking for that, but they don't know what it is so then they, they seek out worldly things as such. And like, by all means, having money is great and having a nice car is great and liking this and wanting that is great but a lot of people think they (sic.), that's... that's the pinnacle of their life. That's what they need to make them happy. And you'll find like, you'll find that a lot of them people are not happy.

-Participant V

They also stay because they've experienced something, that nothing else can, like, give them, which is Jesus. So, that, that to me is the big one. Because I've heard so many stories where they went to, like, the Adoration and Jesus, and they start breaking up in tears or they get overwhelming peace.

-Participant H

But I suppose it comes down to a relationship with Jesus and knowing He's real, knowing He's there for you. If you're like, you know like, you might see Him as being a father or like being a brother to you. The same with like Our Lady. So, I suppose you kind of put up with all of this stuff that is grand. You put up with all the stuff with the media. You put up with isolation. You put up with... people telling you it's weird. Tell you you should be out having one-night stands. People telling you you should be out drinking and [...] drugs. This is the proper way. This is, this is a fulfilling life. This is getting the best out of me and this is the way of giving to other people as well.

-Participant Q

“Cause we've experienced the real presence of our Lord. It's just, like I know for myself, if I didn't pray for a day. I'm lost, I'm completely lost. I open doors to the enemy to come in. And everything just ends up going wrong. You know, that kind of thing. It's like, we know this peace. We do something wrong, we go to Confession. We can offer it up. We're sorry for our sins, we know Jesus is going to be merciful towards us. We know we're not perfect. We know we don't have a life without it. Like we feel, we have a life with Jesus whereas we don't... You

know, if we don't go to Mass, we don't do these things, we don't have a life.”

-Participant L

“Well, I suppose, like, it's more their encounter with God, themselves. Like... and they obviously get some fulfillment out of it. Like they obviously there's some wee spark like when they go back like they that keeps them wanting to come back, like, otherwise, I don't think they would stay.”

-Participant B

As we can see, a recurring theme here is the need for fulfillment. As the participants explain, young Catholics remain Catholic as their faith fulfills this need in some way, be it through a relationship with Jesus and an understanding of His presence or a connection with God. In line with this idea, the participants seem to imply an initial encounter or experience with God: what this specifically looks like and entails is not very clear. Nevertheless, several of the other participants credited retreats or youth events and groups like Youth 2000 as being a factor in helping young Catholics remain Catholic. Such gatherings are likely sources of such initial encounters. The recurring theme of rejecting a secular lifestyle for a Christian one can also be observed here and appears to create a sort of good vs. evil dichotomy: while choosing a Christian life-style is viewed as a path to happiness and fulfillment, the secular one is viewed as one of harmful excesses and disappointment. The following participant's explanation for why young Catholics remain Catholic demonstrates this idea further:

“I can only speak from my own experience, and it would be maybe because they've lived in that secular way of life. And maybe, maybe they've experienced the heartache of it and the pain and the discontentment within in it. And, maybe they feel that they're happier staying where they are. And that was my experience so, and, I would imagine maybe that's.. maybe, you know, 'cause there's a lot of people that I know that have lived the other way too. I have a lot of people at Youth2000 that I know. Like, you know, the question about friends earlier. I wouldn't consider them close friends, but I know them. But they have shared with

me about different things. They have lived, you know, the other way as well. Where they sort of, where they maybe watched a lot of pornography or they've cohabited or they've, you know, haven't gone to Mass. They've fallen away from the faith. So I suppose what maybe keeps those people, here, is the fact that they've found joy where they are. And I think that is why people stay."

-Participant T

Much like in their explanations as to why they were Catholic themselves, a few participants cited parental and/or cultural influences as reasons that young people remained Catholic:

"Could be a cultural thing as well. You know, their parents could be heavily Catholic as well and they're kind of just going with the flow. I'm sure there's a little bit of that involved."

-Participant O

"I suppose it's a mixture of things. Parents. Some parents would give their children the right to choose and say go off, do whatever you want. I know there's even some relations of my own that would just say. Well, if you want to go to Mass, you can go, if you don't, that's fine. And that's it. Other parents would be like, let's go, we're going to Mass and that's it. Like, there was no 'I don't want to go' or whatever. And also there is the thing where it was normal to go. So, you wouldn't ever think of not going, because, it was just a part of your routine. And once part of your routine, it's probably harder to not go than to go because you would be consciously thinking about 'I haven't gone to Mass' like anybody else I suppose. 'I haven't gone, I have to go' or whatever. You know, it was just part of your routine, part of your timetable or whatever. It was just something you did."

-Participant M

Given the high degree to which Catholicism was intertwined with Irish culture throughout much of the island's history, such familial-cultural influences make sense. However, these next two participants challenge this idea and state that such influences are no longer the sole factors that keep Irish youth Catholic:

"I think the people who stay... it has to mean something to them. Because maybe years and years ago, in Ireland anyway, like, you would have just grown up Catholic, went to Mass every week. It just was a thing you did, because everyone else was doing it and that was just the culture. But nowadays, like, for a young person to want to go to Mass on Sunday, it has to mean something to them

because there's so many other things you can do like sports, shopping, you name it. Like, you can do it. For someone to remain a Catholic, and remain a practicing Catholic, it has to mean something. God has to mean something to them because when you're an adult you're not being forced to go to Mass by your parents. So youth have or had some experience with God or you need God in your life, or... Yeah, He's helped you in some way, and, like, prayer means something to you or you just, maybe you like the com-... like, you've met friends, you like the community. Yeah, there has to be some reason I suppose other than just 'my mom told me when I was young,' you know? That doesn't really work anymore."

-Participant G

"Yeah, like I know from whenever growing up, like it was more like you had to do this or you to like, obviously because you would have been like 'nah, I don't want to do that.' So it was more, kinda like, drilled into you to do everything. Like, it was good at the same time because it was a good base but it was kind of more, like now, it's more, like, you understand, like, the love Jesus has for you. Like, you feel it more. Cause like, and you understand, and like, it's between you and.. you and Him rather than being, like, you have to go to Mass or you'll go to Hell.

-Participant B

In other words, from the perspective of these participants, the effectiveness of traditional culture in passing down religion is waning; what is of greater importance is finding personal significance or meaning in the religion. Such personal connection is what sustains faith. This is a very key insight and may perhaps be reflective of Ireland's relatively recent participation in globalization. As an English-speaking country, it has had a strategic advantage on the world stage (Keane 2018). Such globalization is thought to produce a more individualistic culture, which in and of itself should not be understood as a bad thing. What this does mean, however, is that as the world becomes more interconnected and shifts toward a more individualistic way of thinking, religious organizations will have to adapt or respond to such new cultural frameworks if they seek to maintain or better serve their adherents.

What is your prayer life like? In what ways do you pray? About how often do you pray?

For all of the participants, prayer was a part of their Catholic practice. A study conducted by Andersen (2010) on Catholic practice in Ireland found that 41% of Catholic adults aged 18-29 prayed on a daily basis. In contrast, notably consisting of young practicing Catholics within the exact same age-range, virtually all of the participants in this present study reported praying daily. When answering this question, most of the participants reported their daily prayer routine. Several of the participants qualified that their prayer life could improve, that the amount or extent to which they would pray would fluctuate, or otherwise implied that they were describing a best-case scenario for a day's worth of prayer.

Nevertheless, most of the participants reported that they had a very rich-prayer life consisting of a beautiful and diverse variety of prayers. 13 out of 15 participants, or 86% of the sample, reported including the Rosary within their prayer life and 4 of the participants would often pray it in their car, typically on their way to work. Implied in this is that 86% of the participants were also praying the Our Father, the Glory Be, and the Hail Mary regularly as these prayers are components of the Rosary. Two participants respectively identified praying the Our Father and the Hail Mary separate from the Rosary. It is also interesting to note that 5 of the participants came from families that took part in Family Rosaries either currently or previously when they were growing up and an additional participant reported taking part in general family prayer.

Additional prayers that the participants mentioned included the Divine Mercy Chaplet and the Angelus, of which 40% and 33% of the sample respectively identified as

part of their prayer life. Furthermore, one participant reported praying the Chaplet of the Holy Spirit regularly: a prayer new to the author despite being a life-long practicing Catholic. Three participants also respectively reported doing daily examinations of conscience and listening to Praise and Worship music regularly. Interestingly, the participants showed a preference for praying in the morning as about 67% of the sample reported that they took part in some sort of morning prayer.

Many of the prayers listed were traditional Catholic prayers. In addition to these textual, written, set prayers, 60% of the participants reported taking part in open-ended prayers in some shape, way or form. This usually consisted of conversation with God (or particularly the second or third persons of the Trinity: Christ and the Holy Spirit) or through a petition such as help to get through the day. Three of the participants reported taking part in a Holy Hour⁺⁺⁺ and 60% of the participants reported attending Adoration. This is not surprising as most of the participants were recruited from a local prayer group which attends Adoration every Wednesday. Notably, five participants also mentioned that reading scripture was a part of their prayer life, with a couple specifically mentioning that they read the Bible using *lectio divina*^{§§§}. Similarly, three participants also read from the Divine Office^{****}. With regards to the importance of reading scripture to the Catholic faith, one participant commented,

“Cause I think you don’t know the Lord ‘til you know His, you know, His life. You know, His book, you know. Like, you have to read the Bible to be Catholic, like, I think to be called prac-... like, I would use the analogy of like... you can’t just... saying you’re Catholic doesn’t make you... doesn’t make you Catholic as

⁺⁺⁺ Holy Hour, an hour some Catholics set apart in their day for prayer.

^{§§§} Lectio divina is a Catholic method of reading scripture. In its basic essence, it is a form of prayer that involves slowly reading and mediating on the passage. (Vaticana 1994)

^{****} The Divine Office, also known as the Liturgy of the Hours, they are a set of prayers recited throughout the day. These prayers usually consist of a series of Old Testament psalms, passages from scripture, hymns, and other prayers. Vowed religious, such as nuns and monks, say these prayers every day. (Vaticana 1994)

such because... it's like, if I kicked a football, am I a footballer? No I'm not. I need to practice it. I need to go to trainings. I need to play matches, you know. So to be Catholic, you can't just say 'I'm baptized. I'm Catholic.' Yes you are, Catholic. You've got the mark of God on you, but... how much of a Catholic are you really? You need to be... looking into your faith."

-Participant V

The information collected here is useful in that it gives us an idea of what the prayer life of these participants consists of and what the prayer life of the overall young practicing Catholic population *might* potentially look like. Nevertheless, the statistics provided here should be interpreted with caution. The participants were not given a list of prayers and then told to check off which ones they included in their prayer life and which ones they did not. Instead, they were asked to describe their prayer life freely and in doing so, the participants likely provided a more representative picture of what they actually pray on a regular basis. That said, when we read that 86% of the participants reported praying the Rosary, we should not understand this to mean that the remaining 14% of the sample does not pray the Rosary at all. Instead, it means that these remaining participants *did not mention* the Rosary when asked to describe their prayer life while the rest of the participants did. Similarly, when we discussed that five of the participants included scripture in their prayer life, this did **not** mean that the other 10 participants do not read the Bible on a regular basis. Again, it simply means that 5 participants mentioned scripture as a part of their prayer life while the remaining 10 did not. This is not surprising. After all, it is reasonable to assume that the participants likely saw reading scripture and praying as fundamentally different things given the distinctive nature of the tasks.

What do you perceive as the current issues facing the Irish Catholic Church?

The participants, overall, answered this question using two different perspectives, usually simultaneously: issues that the Church is facing from the outside world and issues that the Church is facing from within. In terms of the external issues, several of the participants identified two areas of concern already familiar to us: the public's response to the scandals and the media.

"I suppose still the fallout from all that happened years ago. It's been addressed but it's not going away."

-Participant Y

"I suppose, the whole scandal is a big one... and trying to get it back on its feet and getting, gaining people's trust because a lot of people would have left because of it as well. It's just a really awkward and difficult situation."

-Participant B

"There is a lot of issues facing the Catholic Church. I think there are a lot of hurts in the Church that have to be healed. There is a lot of people that have suffered abuses from the hands of the Church. I do think that it really helped for Pope Francis to come over and to have the, you know, he did a Mass here at the World Meeting of Families. I think that did a lot of healing for people, but there definitely is more healing needed."

-Participant Q

"I think a lot of damage is being done with the scandals unfortunately. I hate to admit that because it's so sad what happened. But yeah, I think a lot of damage has been done there and, of course the, you know, the secular media. Like the Irish Irish (sic.) television, news stations and radio stations and stuff like that have really jumped on the bandwagon there and really, have really painted a black picture of the Church in Ireland."

-Participant T

"A big issue, again, is people being scared because of the media; because of the backlash the media will give them. I think in Ireland particularly, the media is terrible... terrible for anyone who wants to be Catholic. So, people are immediately scared to be..."

-Participant V

Simply put, the Catholic abuse crisis is an open wound in Ireland and has led people to lose their faith and their trust in the religion; meanwhile, the media is also perceived to be highly (and perhaps selectively) critical of the Irish Catholic Church: ideas that have both been discussed in detail in previous questions. Also notable, several participants brought up the recent legalization of abortion and gay marriage in the country as again, these events reflect a rejection of Catholic social teaching in Ireland and the Church's declining influence.

In terms of issues within the Church, one issue that several participants perceived and discussed that directly concerns the Church's future was the priest-shortage in Ireland:

"Priest shortages: they have too too much of a... they have far too much to do in the time that's given them, you know what I mean? Like, they're in charge of everything. The school and this. They're in charge of [lists local primary schools]. These are the three major pri-, I mean, secondary schools. Then [lists additional schools]. Seven. That there, they're in charge of eight schools and the three priests. You know what I mean? There's 10, nine in Letterkenny, nine priests altogether. One does the other half of Letterkenny. But, they have far too much to do. Too much of a workload or whatever. And then, you run into difficulty because they're not doing things to the best of their ability because they have to be like, 'oh, but I have to run here'."

-Participant O

"Most parishes now only have one priest for the whole parish. So... but Letterkenny is lucky cause they have three priests. And then, a bishop, and then, there's two hospital chaplains. And... not sure, maybe another. *But they're covering a lot of other parishes too.*" (emphasis added)

-Participant Y

"I think, one... well obviously, there is a massive shortage on priests... and religious too. But, there's not enough priests, so the priests get spread too thin. And... then it makes it harder for a parish to thrive."

-Participant V

As we can see, a common theme in these responses is that priests are spread very thin in Ireland and such shortage of man-power has consequences for their parishes. This

would make sense, because if priests are constantly running from parish to parish or from responsibility to responsibility, they have less time and are less available for one-on-one interactions with their parishioners. These can typically involve encounters such as personal spiritual direction, answering questions that parishioners may approach them with, or simply meeting up for coffee or lunch. To be clear, it is not that priests in Ireland do not do these things at all; *they do*. It is more likely that time constraints *possibly* do not allow them to do all these things as easily, as flexibly, nor as frequently. As participant O put it,

“Like anything, if you are understaffed in the business... that you’ve staff in here, here, here, they can’t give the same commitment and the same positive, you know, positive experience to the customer than they would if they had they were fully staffed.”

Indeed, with an extremely hectic schedule spread across several parishes (and likely across notable distances as well), the priests have less opportunities to get to know their parishioners and to, therefore, respond to their spiritual needs. This is all speculative, however. *Whether or not this is actually the case is a question for future research*, particularly with the priests and bishops in Ireland themselves. There is no doubt that they understand fully the intricacies of this shortage all too well. Additionally, a participant qualified that the priests can’t be expected to handle everything alone and, *from the participant’s perspective*, there is a greater need for the laity to self-volunteer:

“They’re just people (priests) at the end of the day as well. They can’t do everything by themselves. So I think, an issue there is also within communities now, not enough people stepping up and helping them. Like... like helping them when they’re hosting events or if they’re doing a fundraiser or if they’re handing out leaflets or Rosary beads or something, there’s... there’s not enough help.”

-Participant V

Again, this should be understood as simply one participant's perspective. The reality of how much the laity volunteer and take the lead in parish activities and such may very well be quite different. Nevertheless, despite the challenges they face, priests in Ireland have had to find ways to make things work. *For their incredible efforts, the author salutes them.*

Not only was there concern expressed about the number of priests in Ireland, but a few participants expressed concern about the unbalanced demographics of practicing Irish Catholics themselves:

I can sort of see the church really... really kind of dwindling back to a final few. I can see they'll be no priests coming up. They're all just going to die and there will be no one to replace them. And, I think that, like, just, in the way the world is going, it's completely, like, in the opposite direction of what the Catholic Church teaches. So, more and more people are just going to leave. But... again, I think that the people who really want to be there are gonna, like, stay and stay firm and they're gonna rebuild it from there. So I don't necessarily see it as a... a bad thing. But like, I think it's kind of more of a... I don't know what the right word is, but just, like a, a (sic.)... a refresh, like a (sic.), for the church. I don't think it's going to die out completely or anything.

-Participant U

"There's a lot of older people going at the minute that support it. But when they're away, who's going to support it? Churches are going to close. Probably there will be one parish Church kept."

-Participant Y

"There's no, like, when you go to Mass, you don't see... it's, like, all older people. Like, and they're always like, 'aw good on you for a young person coming in.' They're like, you know, there's no, like, in-between, and there's very little my age that would go to Mass. Like... there are really young or, like, really old people."

-Participant B

One participant has an interesting explanation as to why this demographic gap may exist:

"It's almost like there's been a generational skip between those who had a real sort of, what I would call, I don't know... a traditional Irish faith, and then, the generation where all the scandals and everything came out... decided they didn't want to know about the faith, so they haven't had (sic.), they've decided not to

pass on the faith to their children. And so, the children nowadays some of them don't even know who God is or what God is or never even heard of Him. Like, I've come across young people who have (sic.), their question wasn't 'I'm so annoyed with the Church because of this or this or this.' They're just like, 'Who's God?' So I think there's been a generational skip of Catechesis happening."

-Participant R

This would make sense, especially given that the parents of the participants' generation were likely in their 20s and 30s during the 1990s when the scandals broke out, as the participant noted. Given that this age-period is typically when individuals question and solidify their religious beliefs, the scandals likely pushed the individuals within this cohort to reject Catholicism, creating a domino effect in the subsequent generation; however, *this is all purely speculative*. We do not have enough evidence to conclude that this was what really happened. Although the explanation seems tangible, data from the previous Irish census does not appear to indicate support for it as adults aged 50-54 and 55-59 respectively made up less than 8% of Ireland's nonreligious population compared to 20-39-year-olds which made up 45% of this demographic (Central 2017). Despite all this, one thing is certain however: for several of the participants, they perceived a greater need for outreach and a need to rebuild what has been lost...

"So, I think, like, if the crisis is, in a few, like, 30 years time, are these people suddenly gonna come back to the Church? Which I don't think is gonna happen. I think you need to, like, build from the bottom."

-Participant B

"It's going to take something... it's going to take people like us. The people that are faithful. And, organizations like NET Ministries. You know, people that are doing Exodus. Living by example to show, to inspire people again. You know? It's a big uphill task, but we have to keep trying... and we never give up hope, and with God anything is possible. And I think that will bring a lot of people back."

-Participant T

Indeed, as an example of a response to such issues perceived among Catholics in Letterkenny, the author learned through informal interactions that there are Catholic groups that often take part in such community outreach efforts in the city. In this way, they are creating their own sparks.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a considerable amount of information that we have learned regarding the religiosity of these young-adult practicing Catholics in Ireland. Beginning with the primary research question, why are these devout young Catholics keeping their faith? In summary, it is because the participants...

- Grew up in Catholic families and in a Catholic society and have held on to these roots
- Believe Catholicism to be true
- Found dissatisfaction with living a secular life and found genuine joy upon returning to their faith
- Have a need for God and fulfill it through the Church
- Have Catholic role models that help them grow in their faith.

The participants cited similar reasons for identifying as Catholic and put emphasis on their circumstantial reasons for doing so. Reflecting on their own experiences, these participants believe that young Catholics leave the Church as a result of the scandals, selective negative reporting and promotion of lifestyles contrary to Church teaching in the media, a preference for the world over the Church as they move in separate directions, and a lack of understanding the faith. Conversely, the participants believed that young people remain Catholic, in addition to family ties and cultural reasons, as they

encounter God or have some sort of experience, find community and happiness within the Catholic faith, have a need for fulfilment, a dissatisfaction with the secular lifestyle, or simply because their faith means something to them. For them personally, all of the participants were currently experiencing the Church positively at least to some significant degree as they found community through their faith and saw the Church as a place to encounter the sacraments and God's grace. Some participants reported experiencing the Church both positively and negatively for reasons that varied from participant to participant.

To the participants, self-identifying as Catholic was not enough and they believed that it required a commitment to living by its teachings and demonstrating the faith through your actions. Likewise, being Catholic meant having an identity, a purpose, the hope and goal of reaching Heaven, and some sort of connection with Christ. Such Catholic identity for many of the participants was an important part of their Irish identity as they related the faith with the history of the island. Nevertheless, there were several participants who saw their national and their religious identities as separate entities.

As practicing Catholics, the participants lived out their faith by attending Mass on a weekly basis (and in some cases beyond that), going to Adoration regularly and by maintaining a rich daily prayer life with a usage of a variety of prayers, and a notable preference for praying in the morning. The Rosary was also a significant part of the participants' prayer life as nearly all of the participants reported praying it regularly in some way, be it with their families or on their way to work. In taking part in such practices, most of the participants' friends and family were generally supportive or tolerant of their faith, although there were exceptions. Lastly, the participants *perceived*

several issues facing the Catholic Church in Ireland including the recurring themes of the media and the scandals along with other newly-identified perceived issues such as the priest shortage, the unbalanced demographics among the practicing faithful, and the perceived need for further outreach.

DISCUSSION

Although this study provided novel insights into the religious practice of young practicing Catholics in Ireland, it is important to recognize several limitations that the study faces. First, the study was collected through a convenience sample and did not use any sort of random sampling nor random selection methods and was reliant on a relatively small sample size of 15 people. Furthermore, virtually all of the participants came from County Donegal, with a heavy number of participants coming from Letterkenny in particular. The sample was also disproportionately male. With all of this in mind, we cannot generalize the responses of the participants nor the conclusions of the study to the general population of young practicing Catholics in Ireland, and, given that randomized methods were not in use, it cannot be adequately generalized to this demographic in County Donegal nor Letterkenny either.

The importance of the recognition of the over-sampling of participants from County Donegal cannot be understated. There is a perception in the area that the region is more religious compared to the rest of the country: an idea shared by the participants,

“Donegal has a very very strong Catholic faith. Like, we’re known as the forgotten county cause we’re kind of separated from... from the rest kinda. Just by The North and... the Republic, we’re only connected by a wee-bit, so we’re kind of like, ignored a lot. Which I think has helped the faith to grow up here.”

Given this perceived heightened religiosity in the region, this gives us further reason to be short to generalize the results of the study to the general young Catholic population in Ireland altogether.

It is also worth noting that as a qualitative study, the study at hand explored *self-identified* behaviors, recollections about past events, as well as *perceptions* and understandings of certain situations. With this in mind, it is possible that there is a difference between what the participants say and what they actually do, what they remember and what exactly happened, and what they perceive and how things are in reality. This should not be misunderstood: *this is not meant to discredit the participants nor to accuse them of having a dishonest character*. Instead, this is simply a recognition of the nature of interview-methods and of qualitative studies: such discrepancies are natural and expected. Interview methods are used precisely because they allow us to get an understanding people's perceptions: how they say they are experiencing things, how they see themselves, and how they interpret certain situations. Quantitative methods simply cannot represent such ideas as fully nor as easily.

Upon reading these limitations, the reader may wonder what use or merit this study may have. Despite these limitations, the study serves as a spark: a beginning. Whereas before there was a gap in the literature, for the first time, the voices of young practicing Catholics in Ireland are being heard and documented in the context of their practices and their reasonings for keeping their Catholic faith. As a pioneer study, this will serve as a base and a comparison for future research by other curious individuals, ideally those with access to more intensive, randomized methods and much larger sample

sizes. As such, such hypothetical future endeavors may refute or confirm the findings found here. The present study offers a comparison and a place to start.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

Take a minute or two and think back starting from your childhood all the way until now. What was your experience like growing up Catholic?

(for converts to Catholicism) Think about your conversion and what brought you here? Why did you decide to become Catholic?

What does being Catholic mean to you?

What are some of the ways in which you practice your Catholic faith?

Ireland is said to be going through a period of heavy secularization currently. Why have you decided to remain Catholic?

Why do you identify as Catholic? Describe your Catholic identity.

How do you currently experience the Church right now? Is it an overall positive or negative experience?

To what degree is being Catholic part of your Irish identity?

Is your family supportive of your Catholic faith?

Are your friends supportive of your Catholic faith?

Why do you think young people are leaving Catholicism?

If they do stay, why do you think young people remain Catholic?

What is your prayer life like? In what ways do you pray?

About how often do you pray?

What do you perceive as the current issues facing the Irish Catholic Church?

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Native city:

Current city if not Letterkenny:

Age:

Please select:

Male, female

Current occupation(s):

Highest level of education currently: (select one)

Technical Certification/ Trade

PhD

Master's

Bachelor's

Associate's

some college

High school

Some high school

Have you gone to Mass within the last year? Yes / No

Are you a part of any Catholic groups or organizations? If so, list below

Do you have any sort of Catholic imagery or symbols in your home? Yes / No

Do you own a rosary? Yes / No

If you own a vehicle, do you have a rosary on your mirror? Yes / No

Do you own a Bible? Yes / No

Do you own a Catechism? Yes / No

IF FEMALE: have you ever considered becoming a nun? Yes / No

IF MALE: have you ever considered the priesthood? Yes / No

Have you ever attended a discernment event or retreat? Yes / No

If you plan on having children, do you plan on raising them as Catholic?

Not applicable

Yes

No

Undecided

Prefer not to answer

Please circle the sacraments that you have received:

Baptism
Confirmation
Eucharist
Holy Orders
Anointing of the Sick
Reconciliation/Confession
Matrimony

Were you regularly part of a Catholic Youth Group at any time between the ages of 11-18?
Yes/ No

Do you have at least one parent who self-identifies as a practicing Catholic? Yes / No

Do you have at least one grandparent who self-identifies as a practicing Catholic? Yes / No

In general, how often were you brought to Mass during most of your upbringing?

Once a year
Once a month
Once a week
Once a day
Rarely
Never

In general, how often do you attend Mass now?

Once a year
Once a month
Once a week
Once a day
Rarely
Never

Below is a calendar from last month, December 2019. Please put an X in all of the days you are sure you attended Mass. If you think you did but are unsure of the day, you can put a question mark in the day nearest to when you think you attended Mass.

DECEMBER 2019						
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

Download & Print Free Calendars From www.wiki-calendar.com

This is the end of the survey. Please return to the researcher. Thanks for your participation!