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The hidden exodus: Catholics becoming Protestants

Thomas Reese | Apr. 18, 2011

Viewpoint

The number of people who have left the Catholic church is huge.

We all have heard stories about why people leave. Parents share stories about their children. Academics talk about their students. Everyone has a friend who has left.

While personal experience can be helpful, social science research forces us to look beyond our circle of acquaintances to see what is going on in the whole church.

The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Research Center?s Forum on Religion & Public Life has put hard numbers on the anecdotal evidence: One out of every 10 Americans is an ex-Catholic. If they were a separate denomination, they would be the third-largest denomination in the United States, after Catholics and Baptists. One of three people who were raised Catholic no longer identifies as Catholic.

Any other institution that lost one-third of its members would want to know why. But the U.S. bishops have never devoted any time at their national meetings to discussing the exodus. Nor have they spent a dime trying to find out why it is happening.

Thankfully, although the U.S. bishops have not supported research on people who have left the church, the Pew Center has.

Pew?s data shows that those leaving the church are not homogenous. They can be divided into two major groups: those who become unaffiliated and those who become Protestant. Almost half of those leaving the church become unaffiliated and almost half become Protestant. Only about 10 percent of ex-Catholics join non-Christian religions. This article will focus on Catholics who have become Protestant. I am not saying that those who become unaffiliated are not important; I am leaving that discussion to another time.

Why do people leave the Catholic church to become Protestant? Liberal Catholics will tell you that Catholics are leaving because they disagree with the church?s teaching on birth control, women priests, divorce, the bishops? interference in American politics, etc. Conservatives blame Vatican II, liberal priests and nuns, a

permissive culture and the church?s social justice agenda.

One of the reasons there is such disagreement is that we tend to think that everyone leaves for the same reason our friends, relatives and acquaintances have left. We fail to recognize that different people leave for different reasons. People who leave to join Protestant churches do so for different reasons than those who become unaffiliated. People who become evangelicals are different from Catholics who become members of mainline churches.

Spiritual needs

The principal reasons given by people who leave the church to become Protestant are that their ?spiritual needs were not being met? in the Catholic church (71 percent) and they ?found a religion they like more? (70 percent). Eighty-one percent of respondents say they joined their new church because they enjoy the religious service and style of worship of their new faith.

In other words, the Catholic church has failed to deliver what people consider fundamental products of religion: spiritual sustenance and a good worship service. And before conservatives blame the new liturgy, only 11 percent of those leaving complained that Catholicism had drifted too far from traditional practices such as the Latin Mass.

Dissatisfaction with how the church deals with spiritual needs and worship services dwarfs any disagreements over specific doctrines. While half of those who became Protestants say they left because they stopped believing in Catholic teaching, specific questions get much lower responses. Only 23 percent said they left because of the church?s teaching on abortion and homosexuality; only 23 percent because of the church?s teaching on divorce; only 21 percent because of the rule that priests cannot marry; only 16 percent because of the church?s teaching on birth control; only 16 percent because of the way the church treats women; only 11 percent because they were unhappy with the teachings on poverty, war and the death penalty.

The data shows that disagreement over specific doctrines is not the main reason Catholics become Protestants. We also have lots of survey data showing that many Catholics who stay disagree with specific church teachings. Despite what theologians and bishops think, doctrine is not that important either to those who become Protestant or to those who stay Catholic.

People are not becoming Protestants because they disagree with specific Catholic teachings; people are leaving because the church does not meet their spiritual needs and they find Protestant worship service better.

Nor are the people becoming Protestants lazy or lax Christians. In fact, they attend worship services at a higher rate than those who remain Catholic. While 42 percent of Catholics who stay attend services weekly, 63 percent of Catholics who become Protestants go to church every week. That is a 21 percentage-point difference.

Catholics who became Protestant also claim to have a stronger faith now than when they were children or teenagers. Seventy-one percent say their faith is ?very strong,? while only 35 percent and 22 percent reported that their faith was very strong when they were children and teenagers, respectively. On the other hand, only 46 percent of those who are still Catholic report their faith as ?very strong? today as an adult.

Thus, both as believers and as worshipers, Catholics who become Protestants are statistically better Christians than those who stay Catholic. We are losing the best, not the worst.

Some of the common explanations of why people leave do not pan out in the data. For example, only 21 percent of those becoming Protestant mention the sex abuse scandal as a reason for leaving. Only 3 percent say they left because they became separated or divorced.

Becoming Protestant

If you believed liberals, most Catholics who leave the church would be joining mainline churches, like the Episcopal church. In fact, almost two-thirds of former Catholics who join a Protestant church join an evangelical church. Catholics who become evangelicals and Catholics who join mainline churches are two very distinct groups. We need to take a closer look at why each leaves the church.

Fifty-four percent of both groups say that they just gradually drifted away from Catholicism. Both groups also had almost equal numbers (82 percent evangelicals, 80 percent mainline) saying they joined their new church because they enjoyed the worship service. But compared to those who became mainline Protestants, a higher percentage of those becoming evangelicals said they left because their spiritual needs were not being met (78 percent versus 57 percent) and that they had stopped believing in Catholic teaching (62 percent versus 20 percent). They also cited the church?s teaching on the Bible (55 percent versus 16 percent) more frequently as a reason for leaving. Forty-six percent of these new evangelicals felt the Catholic church did not view the Bible literally enough. Thus, for those leaving to become evangelicals, spiritual sustenance, worship services and the Bible were key. Only 11 percent were unhappy with the church?s teachings on poverty, war, and the death penalty Ñ the same percentage as said they were unhappy with the church?s treatment of women. Contrary to what conservatives say, ex-Catholics are not flocking to the evangelicals because they think the Catholic church is politically too liberal. They are leaving to get spiritual nourishment from worship services and the Bible.

Looking at the responses of those who join mainline churches also provides some surprising results. For example, few (20 percent) say they left because they stopped believing in Catholic teachings. However, when specific issues were mentioned in the questionnaire, more of those joining mainline churches agreed that these issues influenced their decision to leave the Catholic church. Thirty-one percent cited unhappiness with the church?s teaching on abortion and homosexuality, women, and divorce and remarriage, and 26 percent mentioned birth control as a reason for leaving. Although these numbers are higher than for Catholics who become evangelicals, they are still dwarfed by the number (57 percent) who said their spiritual needs were not met in the Catholic church.

Thus, those becoming evangelicals were more generically unhappy than specifically unhappy with church teaching, while those who became mainline Protestant tended to be more specifically unhappy than generically unhappy with church teaching. The unhappiness with the church?s teaching on poverty, war and the death penalty was equally low for both groups (11 percent for evangelicals; 10 percent for mainline).

What stands out in the data on Catholics who join mainline churches is that they tend to cite personal or familiar reasons for leaving more frequently than do those who become evangelicals. Forty-four percent of the Catholics who join mainline churches say that they married someone of the faith they joined, a number that trumps all doctrinal issues. Only 22 percent of those who join the evangelicals cite this reason.

Perhaps after marrying a mainline Christian and attending his or her church?s services, the Catholic found the mainline services more fulfilling than the Catholic service. And even if they were equally attractive, perhaps the exclusion of the Protestant spouse from Catholic Communion makes the more welcoming mainline church attractive to an ecumenical couple.

Those joining mainline communities also were more likely to cite dissatisfaction of the Catholic clergy (39 percent) than were those who became evangelical (23 percent). Those who join mainline churches are looking for a less clerically dominated church.

Lessons from the data

There are many lessons that we can learn from the Pew data, but I will focus on only three.

First, those who are leaving the church for Protestant churches are more interested in spiritual nourishment than doctrinal issues. Tinkering with the wording of the creed at Mass is not going to help. No one except the Vatican and the bishops cares whether Jesus is ?one in being? with the Father or ?consubstantial? with the Father. That the hierarchy thinks this is important shows how out of it they are.

While the hierarchy worries about literal translations of the Latin text, people are longing for liturgies that touch the heart and emotions. More creativity with the liturgy is needed, and that means more flexibility must be allowed. If you build it, they will come; if you do not, they will find it elsewhere. The changes that will go into effect this Advent will make matters worse, not better.

Second, thanks to Pope Pius XII, Catholic scripture scholars have had decades to produce the best thinking on scripture in the world. That Catholics are leaving to join evangelical churches because of the church teaching on the Bible is a disgrace. Too few homilists explain the scriptures to their people. Few Catholics read the Bible.

The church needs a massive Bible education program. The church needs to acknowledge that understanding the Bible is more important than memorizing the catechism. If we could get Catholics to read the Sunday scripture readings each week before they come to Mass, it would be revolutionary. If you do not read and pray the scriptures, you are not an adult Christian. Catholics who become evangelicals understand this.

Finally, the Pew data shows that two-thirds of Catholics who become Protestants do so before they reach the age of 24. The church must make a preferential option for teenagers and young adults or it will continue to bleed. Programs and liturgies that cater to their needs must take precedence over the complaints of fuddy-duddies and rubrical purists.

Current religious education programs and teen groups appear to have little effect on keeping these folks Catholic, according to the Pew data, although those who attend a Catholic high school do appear to stay at a higher rate. More research is needed to find out what works and what does not.

The Catholic church is hemorrhaging members. It needs to acknowledge this and do more to understand why. Only if we acknowledge the exodus and understand it will we be in a position to do something about it.

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