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# Surveys show who may be leaving the Catholic church

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A Pew survey earlier this year found that 10 percent of Americans claim to be former Catholics. While Catholics remain at 25 percent of the U.S. population, it is immigration that is keeping the numbers up. Who are the Catholics who are leaving? Are they the critical and disloyal? The data point to a more complex picture.

*Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, which analyzes customer behavior and categorizes it according to two dimensions: critical or noncritical, and loyal or nonloyal.

Noncritical customers don't demand much and will stay as long as basic needs are met. Critical customers demand more. In either case, if their loyalty is low and they are unsatisfied, they will change to an alternative. Low loyalty makes exit easy. Some sociologists characterize the United States as a religious marketplace where nonloyal members can shop endlessly. For critical members who are loyal, exit becomes more costly.

Our 2007 study of Voice of the Faithful Catholics suggests they are both loyal and critical. They don't see themselves as consumers, but as partners who share in the church's beliefs, practices and mission. Formed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), which envisions an active role for the laity, they want the laity's role in the governance of the church to be institutionalized.

The profile of Voice of the Faithful members is consistent with previous research on loyal members who remain with troubled organizations to reform them. They are highly educated, hold professional positions, have high incomes and are active in their professions and communities. Their ability to influence outcomes in other forums such as the academy, corporations or government has shaped the way they function as Catholics. Instead of giving up, they have put their resources at the service of reform.

Voice of the Faithful members' levels of commitment to the church exceed those of the general Catholic population. Table 1, comparing the national survey in *American Catholics Today* (2007) with the survey in *Voices of the Faithful: Loyal Catholics Striving for Change* (2007), shows

members have more exposure to Catholic education, attend Mass, pray more frequently and say the church is more important in their lives.

However, Voice of the Faithful members are almost twice as likely to say they might leave the church as Catholics in the general population. How do we understand this seeming contradiction? Hirschman asserts that voice and exit can be complementary. He proposes that loyal members will make every effort to engage organizational leaders if they think they have a chance to influence a decision and gain a favorable outcome. This suggests why Voice of the Faithful Catholics can show a higher level of commitment and also express a greater likelihood that they “might leave.”

While the national survey in *American Catholics Today* indicates the great majority of American Catholics claim they have a right to participate in parish decisions, only a small percentage have joined church reform groups. Perhaps this implies that many Catholics are uncritical and will stay as long as basic needs are met. What variables explain this?

Let’s look at age. Pre-Vatican II Catholics (born before 1940) in the general and Voice of the Faithful populations are least likely to leave. Vatican II and post-Vatican II Voice of the Faithful members (born between 1941 and 1965) are more than twice as likely to leave as their cohort in the general population. In the general population, millennials (born after 1978) are most likely to leave.

Let’s look at gender. About 60 percent of Voice of the Faithful members are women and half of them are Vatican II Catholics. Traditionally women have been the most active members of the church. Perhaps highly educated Catholic women may be more likely to be found among the 10 percent of Americans who call themselves former Catholics.

What are the implications for the future? Pre-Vatican II Catholics have both the highest Mass attendance and mortality rates. There are serious concerns about Latino immigrants joining Protestant groups. Maybe many highly educated and loyal Catholics are on their way out of the fold. What does this say about the future of the church’s lay leadership?

Theologian Paul Philibert predicted in 2005: “We can expect to see more examples like Voice of the Faithful and more exasperated defections from the Catholic community until meaningful lay consultation and participation become a greater part of parish and diocesan life.”

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