

MAPPING THE TERRAIN:

Discovering the reality of young Catholics

Matthew van Duyvenbode



BACKGROUND and METHODOLOGY

Why this project?

In recent years, there have been many excellent moves to enhance our ministry amongst young Catholics. In local parishes and schools, volunteers and paid staff are working tirelessly to encourage young people to explore their faith in accessible and meaningful ways. Diocesan youth services, retreat centres, movements and organisations seek to complement this sterling work, providing resources, training, larger-scale experiences and specific charisms which are so necessary for adventurous young people. At a national level, these diocesan and organisation representatives have been developing fresh ways of working collaboratively, with the launch of the Catholic Youth Ministry Federation (CYMFed) in 2009.

One of the key aims of CYMFed is to develop and strengthen the direction for Catholic youth ministry in England and Wales. In order to set a direction for our journey, we need to pause for a moment and get our bearings – to map the terrain of the world our young people inhabit. This research into the lives of young Catholics is a crucial element in enabling the whole Church to prayerfully consider its understanding of how we minister amongst young people.

How to read the research

This document is a summary report of the key trends to emerge from a thorough research project conducted with a thousand young people. It is accompanied by an application process which can be used to examine the implications of some of these trends in your local context. It will also be followed by a comprehensive document – due for publication in Autumn 2010 – which will unpack the statistics in more detail, as well as highlighting other valuable sources of background information and comparisons with national and other denominational statistics where appropriate.

The research project was led by a team of youth ministry professionals, including representatives from YCW, CAFOD, NYMO and the wider CYMFed body. This team commissioned the respected research agency 'nfpSynergy' to undertake the research and to independently recruit those who accurately represented the broadest range of Catholic young people; a geographical spread around England and Wales, from rural, suburban and urban settings, and reflecting a balance of gender and ethnicity proportionate to the wider Catholic population. Three phases of the project were undertaken between June and August 2009:

- In-depth focus groups were conducted in the north and the south of the country, with a total of sixteen 15-19 year olds who identified themselves as Roman Catholics (although they had differing levels of engagement with their faith)
- 16 different young people aged 15-19 were interviewed in pairs (again, with a variety of engagement levels, although all the paired partners had a similar outlook on faith)
- These two in-depth 'qualitative' phases of research enabled the research group to reflect on the language and questions that would be used to gather substantial statistical information through the third phase of the project, where 1,000 11-25 year olds answered an anonymous online survey investigating their opinions, thoughts and preferences on a wide range of issue-based and faith-based topics.¹

Those interviewed in the first phases and the largest group of survey respondents fell within the 15-19 year old age range. This was intentional (as it allows us to focus in more closely on a common age group), but within the survey results, there has been statistical adjustment to compensate for this age skew. Finally, it is important to emphasise that all participants were given the opportunity to express that they definitely did not wish to have anything to do with church or religion, in which case they removed themselves from the research process.

In short, we can be confident that the statistical results convey a reliable set of experiences and opinions, gathered from a representative mix of young people throughout England and Wales.

¹ The analysis presented in this summary report is derived from this survey phase of the research, although where aspects are reflected by some of the comments made in the interviews, these will be used to highlight the point.

Who is a young Catholic?

All 1,000 of the survey participants either described themselves as Roman Catholic from a list in the first instance (62%), or, having been unsure or unwilling to use the term – said that they came from a Catholic family or attend(ed) a Catholic school (38%). The process intentionally included those ‘on the edges’ who didn’t immediately self-identify as Roman Catholic. This ensured that the research monitored those young Catholics whose opinion about faith was in flux. It also ensured that we gathered data from those who have a Catholic heritage but choose not to describe themselves in this way.² Although it could be tempting to dismiss those who do not currently identify as Catholic as ‘off the radar’, disinterested or disengaged, it is vital to note that many of these could have identified as Catholic in the past, and may do so again in the future.

Affirming belief in God as vital, many young Catholics are seeking to discover exactly what ‘their God/god’ looks like, whilst others are investigating a range of answers from the typically orthodox at one end of the spectrum to denial of God’s existence at the other.

What is clear from the anecdotal and statistical evidence throughout the research is that young people (like many adults) have a shifting and multi-layered understanding of what it means to be Catholic. On the most basic level, we might expect that if a young person is Catholic, they would describe themselves as such. The large swathe of the ‘non-identifying’ survey group demonstrate otherwise. Across the board, ‘saying that you are Catholic’ is only considered an important part of being Catholic by less than half of the group (48%).

“I’m not a day to day Catholic, I’m sort of RC. I always break a couple of the old rules in the book but I wouldn’t go around saying I’m a Catholic but the views I have are Catholic definitely. The views I have on life and all that is definitely Catholic.” (Male, 18, London)

If Catholicity were measured by practice, there seems to be some distance between the perception of what faith should look like and the lived reality and experience amongst our young people. 54% of 15-25 year olds who described themselves as Catholic said that it was important for a Catholic to go to Mass regularly. 37% of the same group said that they attended Mass or other religious service monthly or more regularly (although experience might encourage us to expect a degree of over-generous projection within their answering).³ But when asked about their own attitudes, less than 1 in 5 felt that going to Mass regularly was important for them personally.⁴

‘Believing in God’ was considered the most important aspect of being a Catholic by the group, with around eight out of ten ranking this as ‘important’ or ‘very important’.⁵ But when we asked about the nature of their belief in God, the results were much more diverse. The survey participants were asked to select the closest statement to their personal belief from a range of: ‘God created the world and is involved in what happens to the world now’; ‘God created the world but is not involved in the world today’; ‘I believe in a higher spiritual power but not a personal god’; ‘I am not sure whether or not I believe in God or a higher spiritual power’; and ‘I don’t believe in God or any higher spiritual power’.

Only 35% of self-identifying Catholics aged 15-25 affirmed an orthodox belief in a personally involved God.⁶ Another one in ten believed in a creative – but not personal – God. 19% believed in a higher power and nearly three in ten of these young Catholics said they were unsure. 7% denied any existence of God or a higher power altogether. Affirming belief in God as vital, many young Catholics are seeking to discover exactly what ‘their God/god’ looks like, whilst others are investigating a range of answers from the typically orthodox at one end of the spectrum to denial of God’s existence at the other.

² In this report, where the distinction between these ‘non-identifiers’ and ‘self-identifiers’ significantly impacts a statistic, the results will be presented separately.

³ If we include the whole survey group, including the younger participants and those who didn’t self-identify as Catholic, the overall proportion is 29%.

⁴ 16% of self-identifying Catholics aged 15-25 felt that going to Mass was important to them personally.

⁵ 82% of the survey group answered ‘important’ or ‘very important’.

⁶ If we include those who didn’t self-identify as Catholic, this proportion drops further to 22% of the whole survey group.

When considering these statistics, it is important to grasp the tireless ability of young people to hold conflicting principles in tension. For many of them, it is simply not incongruous to call themselves Catholic, insist on particular elements of practice or belief to reflect a truly Catholic identity, yet avoid personally practicing their faith or building an internally coherent framework of beliefs. For some, a young Catholic may well be identified by attendance at church; for others it may be something to do with the beliefs they hold. Some regard themselves as Catholic because of their family background, others demonstrate a Catholic faith in how they approach life and belief, yet would be hesitant to describe themselves as Catholic. All those who work with Catholic young people can fruitfully reflect on how they reach out to such a diverse range of young people without solely providing one convenient model or 'habit' of ministry. The application process accompanying this document helps unpack these layers of identity further by using a series of 'types' to examine the interconnecting aspects of Catholic belief, practice and attitude.

The lives of young Catholics

A wide range of questions were asked of our participants in both the interview and survey stages of the research. In many ways, their experience of the world around them mirrors that of young people across the board. Education and family life play an unquestionably significant role for those of school age, while older young people continue to view family and friendship networks as important as they develop into adulthood.⁷ They are concerned about the injustices that they see in the world around them, and will typically get involved with supporting good causes. Like the general youth population, they more readily take action in ways that cost little time or energy, with only one in five having volunteered to help in the local community in the past year, while 70% had given money to charity and 53% had sponsored somebody else in a charity event.

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Stress is a key factor in the lives of young Catholics. Half of the young people surveyed felt stressed or worried at least once a week about how they are doing at school or about work, with 43% feeling weekly pressure to achieve in order to please authority figures such as parents or teachers. 54% felt worried at least once a week about having enough money to buy all the things they want, and 43% about having enough money for themselves and their families to live on.⁸ These shockingly high figures about financial concern correlate directly with a period of international fiscal instability, but we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that stress is genuinely felt and has an impact, whether the root cause of the stress is a perceived or real threat.⁹

"As you move towards the exam results you worry and you're thinking what if it all goes wrong and you're going to have to re-take the year or something so I know they're big things but there are trivial things like going out and what to wear and being able to afford certain things." (Female, 18, Birmingham)

The surveyed young people feel strongly that the way adults perceive them is seriously inaccurate. Of the 1,000 respondents, around 1 in 3 (34%) agreed strongly with the idea that older people often misjudge younger people, and a further 1 in 2 agreed slightly with this.¹⁰ This is particularly pronounced among 15-19 year olds, of whom 90% agreed that adults often misjudge young people. Additionally, 3 out of 4 15-19 year olds agreed that stories about young people in the media are always negative. These statistics demonstrate the struggle that young people feel to find acceptance within the wider community, and set a challenge for the wider Church family to become increasingly open and transparent in their partnerships with young Catholics. In this way, the Church can take on a prophetic role in society, providing a safe space for young people to question and explore life's challenges.

⁷ When asked about their current life situation, respondents overwhelmingly agreed with the statements that they are valued by both friends (86%) and family (87%)

⁸ Contained within these groups, 23% worried about having enough money to buy things they want on a daily basis and 18% worried daily about having enough money to live on.

⁹ In a survey for The Future Foundation/nVision/nfpSynergy of 1,000 UK respondents aged 16+ in 2009, nearly 90% of respondents noted that they felt more at risk from financial hardship or losing their job than in comparison to the past few years. In this sense, we can see a similar pattern emerge between adult and youth concerns and stresses.

Living out faith in the world

Having already seen that the survey group's perceptions of Catholic identity are shifting and multi-layered, the results paint an increasingly complex picture when we consider the outworking of this Catholic identity within society. Considering the role of religions in general, 43% of those who identify themselves as Catholic felt that religions cause more harm than good,¹¹ while 36% agreed that people should keep their religious views to themselves to avoid hurting other people's feelings.

86% agreed that it is OK to explain their religion to another person – in dramatic contrast to the 22% who in any way approve of somebody trying to convert another person to his or her religion. In an increasingly globalised society, these results may demonstrate a willingness to engage in dialogue and a deeper awareness of otherness, but equally may reveal a fear of distinctiveness and a dislike for absolute 'rights and wrongs'.

The young people who took part in the research held a range of views about the church itself. Asked to attribute five adjectives to the Catholic Church from a given list of forty-three, 83% of the survey respondents selected at least one word from the cluster: 'authoritative, boring, cautious, conservative, established, exclusive, traditional'. Interestingly, the next most popular cluster (with 59% choosing at least one word) was 'heroic, bold/direct, independent, campaigning, outspoken, challenging, passionate'. These contrasting sets may exemplify the dual perception of 'church' on a local and institutional level – a point picked up in the personal interviews, with a number of the young people affirming that they would be likely to listen to their local parish priest as a trusted authority on issues of poverty, but also raising strong concerns about the wealth of the Catholic Church as a whole.

37% of self-identifying Catholics aged 15-25 said that they attend Mass or other religious services on a regular basis (at least monthly),¹² 17% said they never went, and the remainder would attend occasionally (a few times a year). Tracking 15-25 year olds across the whole survey (including those who might not call themselves Catholic), the results demonstrate that those who attended Mass on a regular basis were also more likely to have identified a spiritual experience in their lives, and were much more likely to use words from the Christian tradition to describe this experience. 28% of this group described an experience of 'being forgiven by God' and 25% 'an awareness of the Holy Spirit', whereas only 7% and 3% respectively of those who said they never attend would use these descriptions. However, spirituality is certainly not off limits for those who never attend Mass, or do so only occasionally – 52% identified that they have had some sort of spiritual experience from a wide-ranging list. The ways in which they described these experiences, however, would be less theistic – 'something spooky or supernatural' (20%), 'a sense of being part of something bigger' (18%), 'a feeling that you are at one with nature and the universe' (17%). Thinking carefully about our language and facilitating moments for spiritual encounter could help some of these seekers begin to associate their spiritual experiences with a dynamic and living Catholic faith.

Looking to the future

Across the whole 11-25 group, most feel hopeful about their individual futures – 1 in 4 feels this way on a daily basis, with a further 64% feeling this way either weekly or monthly. Only 3% responded that they never feel hopeful about the future. Asked to articulate their life aspirations, the overwhelming majority of self-identifying Catholics expressed the desire 'to be happy' as one of their top three goals (72%), with 'to be married or have a partner' (38%) and 'to have close friends' (36%) the next

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¹⁰ Only 4% overall disagreed (i.e. they believe adults rarely misjudge young people)

¹¹ Some of this distaste for religious belief may stem from the term 'religion' itself, which was intentionally chosen as a word which implied distinctiveness - as opposed to 'faith' which can become synonymous with a universally-held spiritual awareness.

¹² 17% of all self-identifying Catholics said that they attended on at least a weekly basis. Across the whole survey group, 29% say that they attend at least monthly, including 12% who say that they attend on a weekly basis.

most chosen aspirations. Aside from happiness, young Catholics tended to rank tangible goals (such as 'to have a lot of money' or 'to have an important job') higher – with 'to help others' (12%) and 'to be the person God wants me to be' (10%) towards the bottom of the ranking. Happiness, it seems, is the touchstone for young people – which may provide a significant challenge in communicating our faith which holds a suffering God as one of its central themes.

Measuring these aspirations against what these self-identifying Catholics expect to achieve, we see an interesting shift amongst the group, with 80% expecting that they will help others in the future either 'definitely' or 'probably'. Although some of this expectation may stem from a desire for social desirability (even in an anonymous survey), similar ideas emerged in the interviews, where participants seemed to see volunteering or supporting charities as something they would do as adults. Whereas only 20% of the 1,000 young people had volunteered in the past 12 months, double this number said they expect to do more volunteering in the future. How effectively we build a culture of engagement for our young people, with the help of volunteering organisations and social action initiatives, will determine whether these expectations bear fruit in the longer term.

A striking point throughout the survey results is a strong age-related pattern amongst those who call themselves Catholic. 11-14 year olds almost universally demonstrate a stronger commitment to orthodox Catholic beliefs and practices than their older counterparts.¹³ Any notion that young Catholics across the board will remain engaged until they become young adults and discover a world of other possibilities is no longer valid – their questioning and decision-making is taking place while they are younger teenagers.

For instance, 57% of 11-14's expressed belief in a creator God who is involved in the world, which drops to 36% of 15-19's and 34% of 20-25's. 64% of 11-14's attended Mass regularly, whereas only 42% of 15-19's and 32% of 20-25's did likewise. These figures may demonstrate a time of adolescent questioning amongst the mid-range young people we surveyed, and perhaps they are not having their questions adequately answered? What is clear, however, is that this 'diluting' of core Catholic concepts amongst those who consider themselves Catholic doesn't automatically remedy itself. Instead of rediscovering deeper and more profound perspectives on faith, the young adults (20-25) in the survey tend to stick with their adolescent views, or continue to find them increasingly diluted.

Those young adults who do remain connected through this difficult transition, however, vocalise a deeper engagement with their faith – 22% of 20-25's who attend Mass regularly expressed 'being the person who God wants me to be' as one of their top aspirations, as opposed to 15% of 15-19 year olds. Likewise, 33% of the older group said that they pray daily and 39% read the Bible weekly, whereas for the younger group, 21% pray daily and 26% read the Bible weekly. Our challenge is to forge new pathways for young Catholics as they walk on their spiritual journey through their teenage years, in order that they too can begin to develop a mature spirituality into their adulthood.

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¹³ It should be noted that 11-14's may also be more likely to say what they think adults would like them to say and have been taught to say.

Gaining our bearings


This document has summarised some of the key findings to emerge from the research project. We have considered the shifting nature of Catholic identity which demonstrates the ability of young people to hold disparate and occasionally contradictory notions as simultaneously valid. We have seen the alarming amount of stress and misunderstanding felt by young people, and noted the challenge for the wider Church community in responding to this. Many young Catholics have identified a sense of the spiritual, but may not be fluent to articulate this in Christian language – and language is increasingly important for a generation comfortable with the notion of explaining faith to others. And we have seen that as they look to the future, young Catholics expect to get more involved with social action than they are currently, but simultaneously their commitment to mainstream Catholic concepts and practice might be expected to diminish. There are, of course, many other areas which we have not been able to share in this summary format, but which will be unpacked in greater detail in the comprehensive version.

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For now, it is vital that we pause for a moment in our ministry to consider the implications of this research – ensuring that we are heading in the right direction, and reaching as many young people within the Catholic sphere as possible. If we are to fully recognise the diversity of how young Catholics see the world and see their own faith, we will need a variety of different pathways, harnessing a wide range of ministries, messages, messengers and media. We will also need to have a commitment to continued conversation, ensuring that all sections of the wider Catholic community can take the opportunity to reflect on their engagement in the mission of the Church to young people.

To assist in our reflection, this document is accompanied by a typology application process, which will help demonstrate the broad spectrum of belief and identity amongst young Catholics in England and Wales, and assist reflection on some of the key questions posed by the research. This typology tool can be used on an individual, parish, school, chaplaincy or diocesan level, and will help us rediscover the breadth of our current challenge in sharing the good news with all people.

In Autumn 2010, alongside the more comprehensive version of this research, there will be a 'vision document' developed by representatives of the Catholic Youth Ministry Federation together with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. This vision document, having reflected on the research, will outline some of our responses, hopes and examples of best practice in responding to the challenges of ministering to and walking alongside young people in today's world.



This research summary is a result of work undertaken for CYMFed, led by the research group: Danny Curtin (Young Christian Workers), Raymond Perrier (CAFOD), Matthew van Duyvenbode and Avril Baigent (Northampton Youth Ministry Office).

We also thank the other members of CYMFed and the wider youth work community who have helped us develop this response.

Our deepest thanks to all those who have funded the research, without whom this work would not have been possible.

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