

Who are the Elms of Today? Examining the Adults Present During  
the Religious Identity Development  
of Catholic-Raised Youth

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## **Biography**

The author was born in Davenport, Iowa, March 8, 1991. She graduated from Parkway South High School in Saint Louis, Missouri in 2009. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Butler University in Psychology and a minor Spanish in 2013, and her Master of Arts degree in Community Psychology from DePaul University in 2016.

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## **Abstract**

Given that a large percentage of former-Catholic adults report leaving the Church before reaching adulthood, and the percentages of Catholic-raised youth retaining their religious identity into adulthood are decreasing, a pressing question currently facing the modern Catholic Church is how to minister to, and retain, Catholic-raised adolescents into adulthood. Current religious and secular literature suggests that adults (both parental and non-parental) may play a crucial role in youths' religious identity development. However, who these adults are and how their presence influences the experience of growing up Catholic is unexplored in the current literature.

In depth oral history narrative interviews were conducted with 24 Catholic-raised young adults; 12 who identify as Currently-Catholic and 12 who identify as Previously-Catholic. During these interviews, participants were asked to describe their experiences growing up Catholic and how they arrived at their current religious identity. Participants were also asked to focus their narrative on the adults they believe played a role in their religious identity development. Transcribed interviews were coded using modified grounded theory open coding strategies. Results include a list of adults present during the religious identity development process of Catholic-raised youth and themes related to characteristics and behaviors common to these adults. In addition, comparisons were drawn between types of adults, adult characteristics and adult behaviors between the two religious identity groups.

In total, the 24 participants described 275 adults ( $M = 12.54$  per participants,  $range = 3-20$ ) during their interviews. Qualitative analysis fit these adults into six adult types: *family adults*, *parish adults*, *school adults*, *religious event adults*, *large groups/communities of adults*, and *other adults* (i.e., adults not met in any of the previous five settings). When discussing the adults present in their religious identity narratives, the characteristics participants felt influenced their religious identity development fell into four thematic categories: *intelligence/lacking knowledge*, *engaging/unengaging personality*, *approachable/unapproachable*, and *authentic/disingenuous*. Finally, behaviors participants felt influenced their religious identity development fell into six thematic categories: *provided unconditional support versus conditional support*, *facilitated/had discussions about religion versus lacked/discouraged religious conversations*, *taught about the Catholic religion versus taught incorrect religious information*, *did or did not model a Catholic lifestyle*, *respected or disrespected other religions*, and *connected youth to Catholic experiences/people versus negative connections to Catholic activities*.

Quantitative analysis using the Mann-Whitney-U test found Currently-Catholic mentioned a significantly higher median number of religious event adults than their Previously-Catholic counterparts. Currently-Catholics also mentioned a significantly higher median number of adults who exhibited the authentic personality characteristic while Previously-Catholic participants mentioned a significantly higher median number of adults who exhibited the unapproachable personality characteristic. Currently-Catholic participants mentioned significantly

higher median numbers of adults who exhibited the positive behavior: *facilitated/had discussions about religion*. Previously-Catholic participants mentioned significantly higher median numbers of adults who exhibited the negative behaviors: *provided conditional support, lacked/discouraged religious conversations, did not model a Catholic lifestyle, and negative connections to Catholic activities*.

This dissertation aimed to add to the limited literature regarding the religious identity formation of Catholic-raised youth, inform educational ministry and outreach strategies, and discuss the applicability and similarities of secular supportive adult behaviors in a religious setting.

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So, he went and lay down. The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore, Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if He calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So, Samuel went and lay down in his place. Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

- 1 Samuel 3:1-10

### **Introduction**

Research suggests that youth who were raised Catholic frequently disaffiliate by the time they reach adulthood (Manhlos-Weber & Smith, 2018). Current literature strongly suggests that adult-youth interactions, both within and outside the family unit, have the potential to greatly shape the lives and identities of religious-raised youth (Dowling et al., 2004; Furrow & Wagener, 2004; Manhlos-Weber & Smith, 2018; Smith & Snell, 2009). However, the specific roles these adults play in the religious identity development journeys of Catholic-raised youth remains unclear in the current literature. In addition, the differences, if any, among adults present in Catholic-raised youths' lives that coincide with their decision to remain in or leave the Catholic Church merits exploration. This study aims to identify and describe the Elis of today. Within this study, "Elis" are individuals who are uniquely placed (both intentionally and unwittingly) within the religious identity development process of Catholic-raised youth. These Elis

are those who guide, educate, counsel, and support Catholic-raised youth as they decide whether to claim an affiliation with the Catholic Church in adulthood.

### **Catholic Affiliation Retention**

In a recent report using data from the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR) longitudinal study, teenagers surveyed in 2002-2003 were resurveyed as adults in 2013. Of these teenagers that identified as Catholic, half identified as former Catholics in adulthood, while the other half retained their Catholic identities (Manhlos-Weber & Smith, 2018). Another recent study of former Catholics found that 74% of their sample left the Catholic Church between the ages of 10 and 20 (McCarty & Vitek, 2018).

These new statistics supported previous Catholic retention findings. In 2009, a Pew Study found as many as 48% of former Catholics indicated they left the Catholic Church before reaching adulthood (18 years old), and another 30% reported leaving between the ages of 19-23 (Pew Research Group, 2009). Based on these findings, McCarty et al. (2018) approximated that 12.8% of young adults in the United States between 18-25 identify as former Catholics and 6.8% of teens between 15 and 17 are former Catholics. A Pew Report (Lipka, 2015) examining the growth of “Nones”, those who answer “none” to the question of what religion do they identify with, stated that for Generation X (those born between 1965-1980), 23% identified as Nones and 21% identified as Catholic. Among young Millennials (those born between 1990-96), 36% identify as Nones and only 16% identified as Catholic.

Researchers suspect the Catholic percentage in the United States may be being held up by the Hispanic population (Lugo, 2009). However, this influx of Hispanic Catholics may not maintain the Catholic percentage in the United States for long. Even among Hispanic Catholics there are signs of decline. A Pew Study (2014), that detailed the changing religious identities of Latinos in the United States, reported that in 2010, 67% of Hispanics in the United States were Catholic, in 2013 that percentage had dropped to 55%. The Pew study (2014) described that those Hispanics former Catholics who had stopped identifying as Catholic between 2010 and 2013 had split between becoming Nones and joining evangelical Christian denominations.

These statistics suggest that Catholic retention efforts for modern youth are currently insufficient to retain Catholic affiliation into adulthood. Following this train of thought, religious research focuses largely on the experiences of adolescence and young adults to identify factors associated with one's decision to retain or depart from their childhood religious affiliation during this formative time in development (Dowling et al., 2004; Furrow & Wagener, 2004; Smith & Snell, 2009).

### **Defining Catholic Identity**

Before the predictors of Catholic-raised youth retaining their Catholic affiliation in adulthood can be discussed, first a definition of what a "Catholic" is and what it means for a young adult to identify as Catholic must be determined. Types of Catholics in Catholic-vernacular vary widely, such as: practicing Catholic, culturally Catholic, cafeteria Catholics or Catholic-lites (who pick and

choose which beliefs to follow; Dillion, 1999), and “Chreaster” or people who only attend Mass at Christmas and Easter (Wittmer, 2011). These titles, often used by those raised within the Catholic tradition to describe themselves or others, are open to interpretation by those using them if the person being labeled is a “real Catholic” or not.

There is no current consensus on the operationalization of what it means for a person to be a “real Catholic” within the realm of research. Most research includes people who self-identify as Catholic (Dillion, 1999; Manglos-Weber & Smith 2018; Nuesch-Olver 2005; Smith et al., 2009). In the search for an operationalization of Catholic, researchers should not confuse religious practice (Mass attendance, prayer frequency, use of the sacraments) or faith (a belief, trust, or hope, in a particular set of beliefs) with religious identity. For example, one operationalization option may be to measure the religious practice of Mass attendance or frequency of prayer to determine if someone is Catholic “enough” to be counted in a study. Another option may be to determine which Catholic beliefs someone affirms or does not affirm. However, the first option requires the research team to determine what level of Mass attendance or prayer is indicative of a “real Catholic.” The second method would require the researcher to operationalize “faith” by determining how many and which affirmed beliefs are enough to be considered Catholic. Canon Law states that once an individual is baptized they are incorporated into the Church of Christ; “By baptism one is incorporated into the Church of Christ and is constituted a person in it with duties and rights which are proper to Christians, in keeping with their condition, to the

extent that they are in ecclesiastical communion and unless a legitimately issues sanction stands in the way” (CIC, c. 96). In line with the current study’s qualitative methodology in which the subjective perspective of the participant is strongly valued, participants who reported being baptized were taken at their word and not tested for affiliation beyond self-identification.

### **How Does One “Form” a Religious Identity?**

Determining one’s identity, or who a person is individually and in relation to others, is a major component of their adolescence and, for many, their full lifetime (Wedow, Schnabel, Wedow & Konieczny, 2017). According to Marcia’s (1966) Identity Statuses Theory, identity consists of two parts: occupation and ideology. Other identity components can include sexuality and cultural background (Markstrom-Adams, Hofstra & Dougher, 1994; Wedow et al., 2017). The process of identity formation and development involves taking in information, experimentation, and eventually conclusions and incorporation (Marcia, 1966; Wedow et al., 2017). Within Marcia’s (1966) theory, the process of forming this concept of self involves an individual going through four statuses: identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement.

Identity diffusion is an undecided and decidedly uninterested state of being, in which the individual does not have strong opinions or conclusions on who they are or want to be. This status is also characterized by a lack of experimentation to explore possible identities. The second status is foreclosure. Foreclosure is defined as a state of having made a commitment to an occupation or ideology but having not put critical thought into whether that occupation or



belief fits well with the self. The third status is moratorium, defined as a state of exploring the many options available and experimenting with different identities and beliefs but never reaching a conclusion. This status could be described as getting lost in exploration. The fourth status is identity achievement, defined as having completed the in-depth exploration of several possible beliefs or occupations and having made a commitment to one that makes the individual feel comfortable and happy.

Viewing identity statuses with the lens of Catholic identity formation (Markstrom-Adams et al., 1993; Reilly, Kawentel, Hurd, & Allen, 2018), identity diffusion may look like someone being raised Catholic but not engaging with the events happening around them such as learning what it means to go through the motions of First Holy Communion or being Confirmed. They are not “for Catholicism” nor are they against it, nor are they exploring how the Catholic religion their parents are attempting to pass down relates or does not relate to them.

A Catholic-raised individual in the foreclosure status may have confidently identified themselves as Catholic, maybe because that is what their family is, but they have not taken the time to explore in depth what it means to be Catholic, or not be Catholic (Markstrom-Adams, 1993). Similar to a Catholic in identity diffusion, a Catholic in identity foreclosure may not be exploring the Catholic religion or other religions to see how well they fit. However, unlike those in identity diffusion, those in identity foreclosure are not left unexplored and challenged because of a lack of interest but instead because they feel a

decision has already been made so further exploration is not needed. For example, in the Markstrom-Adams et al. (1993) study, researchers studied three religious communities (Mormon, Catholic and Protestant) who were the religious minority within their geographic area. In these religious minority groups, there was strong social pressure to take on external signs of fidelity. Given the social pressures around conforming, they found that individuals who reported more frequent church attendance was found among those who scored high in the foreclosure and achievement statuses (the identity commitment statuses) compared to those who reported less frequent church attendance.

A Catholic-raised individual in the moratorium status may be engrossed in the exploration of all the possible religious options available to them. They are so completely engrossed in the quest that they may forget to use the knowledge gained to eventually reach a conclusion. The quest for knowledge and understanding is not to be demonized by the moratorium status. The desire for knowledge and a deeper understanding is crucial to the identity development process. However, when the quest's mission of making an identity decision is lost, identity moratorium emerges. Church attendance frequency was not associated with the non-commitment statuses: diffusion and moratorium (Markstrom-Adams et al., 1993).

Within the final status of identity achievement, a Catholic-raised individual may go one of two ways. They may commit to identifying as Catholic and therefore incorporate that identity, and by connection, the practices and beliefs of the religion into their daily life. Or having explored Catholicism, they

may decide the religion is not a good fit (Reilly et al., 2018). If this is the case, identity achievement would involve selecting and settling into another religion or no religion.

The Meeus-Crocetti model (Crocetti, Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2008), a descendent of the Marcia model (Marcia, 1966), proposes three identity statuses: commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment. Unlike the Marcia model which sees commitment as the result of exploration, the Meeus-Crocetti model supposes a more cyclical model in which identity formation is a journey of exploring the options, committing to an option, and then reconsidering if that option is the best fit and then reentering an exploratory status (Meeus, Schoot, Keijsers, & Branje, 2012). Reilly and colleagues (2018) applied the Meeus-Crocetti model to Catholic identity development. The authors suggest the exploration status involves asking the question: “have you considered what it means to you to be Catholic?” The commitment status involves deciding; “my religious identity is an important part of who I am.” Reconsideration of commitment to a particular identity may be continuing to explore “ways to grow deeper in my religious identity” or exploring other religious traditions if Catholicism does not fit with the current identity (Reilly et al., 2018).

For adults working with Catholic-raised youth, these statuses of identity formation offer a guide on how to accompany them through the formation process (Reilly et al., 2018). The role of exploration and experimentation are key in the identity formation process. Regardless of which status an individual is at, providing spaces that foster youth conversation that explore, discuss, and grapple

with Catholic dogma, social, and moral teachings can provide opportunities for all aspects of identity formation in an organized and informational setting (Reilly et al., 2018). Adults working with Catholic-raised youth and young people should also find ways to support, instead of block, their initiative to engage in the Church community. Finding ways to give young people voice and choice is developmentally important (Reilly et al., 2018). This may involve inviting them to leadership or removing obstacles preventing them from taking leadership positions within the Church.

### **Characteristics of Youth Who Maintain their Childhood Religious Identity into Adulthood**

In a study by Smith and Snell (2009) that interviewed 122 participants once during adolescence and again five years later, researchers found that adolescents across all religions that grew up to be religious in their 20s tended to share a combination of four personal characteristics and two relational characteristics. The personal characteristics consisted of; 1) religious adults had placed high personal importance on their religious identity in adolescence, 2) had many religious experiences during their youth, 3) had read scripture and prayed regularly, and 4) had few doubts about their religious identity. The two relational characteristics consisted of; 1) religious young adults were also likely to have had religious parents and 2) had non-parental adult religious influences.

Research suggests that access to religious adults is a predictor of religiosity in adulthood. According to Smith and Snell (2009), most religious young adults had parents who frequently attended religious service and placed a

strong importance on religious practice in the childhood home. Further, religious young adults could identify adults they could turn to for support, other than their parents, who actively encouraged their religious development (Smith & Snell, 2009).

In line with Smith and Snell's (2009) findings, scholars who work in Christian youth ministry have seen similar trends pointing to the presence of Catholic mentors as a key component in the spiritual development of youth (Dowling et al., 2004; Furrow & Wagener, 2004). Dowling and colleagues (2004) conducted a study examining the influence of spirituality and religiosity on positive youth development. They found that youth with high levels of spirituality and religiosity were more likely to "thrive" than those who were only spiritual, only religious, or neither. They also found that youth with interpersonal ties to their church community showed higher levels of religiosity than those who merely participated in religious practices (e.g. attending services, reading the Bible; Dowling et al., 2004).

Two other studies were identified as focusing on the presence of adults in religious development. Nuesch-Oliver (2005) conducted a qualitative study focused on the religious narratives of college students. The author found that each of the 500 students who wrote a religious autobiography analyzed in the study pointed to the powerful and influential impact adults had (both positively and negatively) on their religious journey. Many students described deepening their own relationships with Christ through observing the intimate relationships adults had with God. Conversely, others articulated the demoralizing effects of

discoveries of youth pastor sex abuse. These adults in the religious community shook the religious foundation of the youth as well as their belief in an all-knowing and all-loving God. Consequently, these negative events led them to question their decision to affiliate with their current religious identity.

Another study by Lanker and Issler (2010) measured mentorship quality and quantity among 170 college students. The authors examined mentoring relationships that are formed in the youth's naturally occurring social network, referred to as natural spiritual mentorship. This study found that college students with at least one identifiable natural mentor differed significantly from their counterparts without natural mentors regarding their religious lives. Specifically, participants with mentors reported feeling more strongly connected to God during times of suffering, more deeply experienced God's presence, were more secure in their relationship with God, and felt accepted by God. They were also more committed to their spiritual communities and to the service of others compared to their mentor-less counterparts (Lanker & Issler, 2010). Lanker and Issler (2010), in addition to Smith et al. (2009; 2014) and Dowling et al. (2004) found youth with mentors were more likely to show high levels of spirituality and religiosity than those who could not identify a mentor.

### **Characteristics of Former Catholics**

In the Manglos-Weber & Smith (2018) report on recent analysis of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) sample of former Catholics

mentioned above, the authors listed seven shared characteristics of former Catholics within their study. These characteristics included beliefs and relationships characteristics. Former Catholics were more likely than other religious groups to think science and Catholic teaching conflict. A similar finding was found by a Pew Study (2016) on “Nones.” Forty-nine percent of Nones who were raised religious and left that religious tradition in adulthood reported not believing in God as their reason for leaving. Many of which cited “science,” “common sense,” “logic,” or “lack of evidence” as playing a part in their decision.

Manglos-Weber et al. (2018) also reported former Catholics tend to be uncomfortable with concrete definitions of God. In other words, they like to “keep such matters open-ended” (Manglos-Weber et al., 2018, p. 8). Relatedly, former Catholics tended to still believe in some sort of God or higher power. Of former Catholics, 57.26% believed in God (compared to 87.94% of Catholics) and 81% of former Catholics reported praying at least rarely (several times a month or less but not never) with 33% reporting they prayed once a week or more.

Regarding families and friendships, former Catholics tended to be raised in a religiously diverse family. In other words, former Catholics are more likely to be raised by parents who do not share the same religion than those who remain Catholic (Manglos-Weber et al., 2018). This finding supports previous religious affiliation retention themes found within the NYCR dataset (Smith & Snell, 2009), that parent religious practice (attending Mass, discussing religion at home, and participating in church activities outside of religious service) is a strong predictor of child religious identity retention in adulthood. Former Catholics were

also more likely than Catholics to report having no friends who identified with a religion within their social network (Manglos-Weber et al., 2018).

In a qualitative study of 1,500 former Catholics, McCarty et al., (2018) identified three common reason for leaving the Catholic Church. Their reasons for leaving the Catholic religion categories included: dissenters, injured, and drifters. Of these participants, 35% were Nones, 29% were non-Protestant Christians, 14% were Atheist or Agnostic, and 9% were Protestant. The majority, 74% of the sample reported disaffiliating from the Catholic Church between the ages of 10 and 20.

Dissenters were former Catholics who disagreed with one or more Catholic Church teachings that they believed made it impossible for them to maintain their affiliation. The most common issues of dissent provided by participants in regard to moral doctrine were: abortion, gay marriage/LGBTQ issues, and birth control. Dissent related to Catholic theological doctrine was also identified by dissenters. Disputed doctrine regarded the existence of Heaven/Hell, who goes to Heaven/Hell, as well as the meaning of salvation were also noted (McCarty et al., 2018).

Injured former Catholics reported one or more key events that damaged their trust in God or their trust in their religious community. These events could include the individual feeling their religious community did not properly support them during a divorce, illness or family death (McCarty et al., 2018). For example, an injured former Catholic may have had parents who went through a divorce. Depending on how their priest, religious relatives, or parish community



reacted to the news, the individual may have felt their religious community had judged and alienated the family instead of supported them during their difficulties. This injury event severed the tie between them and the Church.

Drifters are defined as former Catholics who disconnect from the Church, not due to one or even a few key events, but over a disconnect between what they see as the outdated and “meaningless rules and ritual” of the Church and their experiences in the “real world.” A “so what?” attitude was common within this group. The authors observed that this “so what?” attitude is often consciously or unconsciously learned from watching their parents interact with the Catholic Church (McCarty et al., 2018). If a former Catholic was never taught “why” to care about the Church or incorporate it into their own life, they likely will not reach that conclusion on their own (McCarty et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009).

### **Adult Influences on Youth Outcomes**

A significant body of literature has described different outcomes of youth who had access to supportive adults. As youth develop during adolescence and into young adulthood, they may greatly benefit from the presence of supportive adults (Miranda-Chan, Fruht, Dubon, & Wray-Lake, 2016). These benefits include, but are not limited to, increased academic success (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005, Miranda-Chan et al., 2016), improved psychological well-being (Kogan, Brody & Chen, 2011; Miranda-Chen et al., 2016), a decrease in problem behavior such as criminal behavior (Kogan et al., 2011; Miranda-Chen et al., 2016) and substance use (Tolan, Henry, Schoeny, Lovegrove & Nichols, 2014; Miranda-Chen et al., 2016), and increased satisfaction in romantic

relationships during adulthood (Miranda-Chen et al., 2016). These influences have been shown to remain relatively constant across cultural, gender, and socioeconomic lines (Haddad, Chen & Greenberger, 2011) and also sustain over the course of the youth's life (Miranda-Chen et al., 2016).

Mentoring literature focuses on two types of adult-youth mentoring: formal mentoring and natural (informal) mentoring. Formal mentoring refers to adult-youth mentorships created through a mentorship program where the relationship is entered with the express intention of both adult and youth to form a mentoring relationship and often involves training for the adult (DuBois & Karcher, 2013). Natural mentorships refer to connections with adults already occurring in the youth's social network that develop over time into a more in-depth relationship in which mentoring occurs (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2014).

Though youth meet many adults over the course of their lives, not every adult should be categorized as a mentor. Natural mentoring relationships vary but tend to share common characteristics. At their simplest, mentoring relationships involve an instrumental or instructional component to the relationships where the youth learns from the adult (Karcher & Hansen, 2014; Nakkula & Harris, 2014) and an emotional support component (Bayer, Grossman, & DuBois, 2015; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011).

Looking more closely at these interactions, there are many ways these instructional and emotional components may manifest. One very concrete role an adult may have is as a "teacher" where they impart knowledge and skills to the youth (Karcher & Hansen, 2014; Nakkula & Harris, 2014). This may be a teacher

at school, coach, or other after school activity leader spending extra time with a student where the pair bond over a shared interest. In a religious setting this may take the form of an adult teaching youth how to read the Bible, how to pray both structured and unstructured prayers, imparting knowledge or answering questions about the history and traditions of their shared religious tradition.

Another role adults can play is as a “connector,” linking youth to people, institutions and opportunities that may help the youth achieve their goals and grow (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In a secular setting this often takes the form of connecting youth to jobs or academic opportunities by setting up interviews, writing recommendation letters or facilitating an introduction. Religious-affiliated adults may also perform these tasks in a youth’s life vis-à-vis the religious tradition. They may help connect them to peers and other adults within the religious community, inform them about and help them sign up for retreats, youth conferences, and youth group activities they might not be aware of otherwise that may strengthen their commitment to their religious community.

Somewhat more abstract than passing on specific tangible skills, while still imparting knowledge or wisdom, adults may serve as role models or “exemplars of adult behavior” (Hurd, Stoddard, Bauermeister, & Zimmerman, 2014). Through their function as “role model,” these adults provide examples of how to live a good life: teach values, encourage community engagement, and proper behavior through their own actions. While living a life a youth might want to emulate, the adult may also function as a “compass” through which the youth gauges their own goals and direction in life (Hurd et al., 2014).

Similar to the concept of adults acting as a compass by which youth may gauge their own life, Smith (2005) points to the importance of parents providing exemplars of how to practice their religion in the home through their everyday life. Research suggests that in homes where youth do not receive a clear exemplar of everyday religious practice, an external adult may be able to step in as a model to which the youth may look (Lanker & Issler, 2010; Smith 2005). This does not mean, however, that youth who do receive this example at home do not benefit from interactions with non-parental adults. Instead, these unique interactions provide the authority of experience of a parent and the listening ear of a peer (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, Behrendt, 2005) may instead reinforce the example being taught in the home (Lanker & Issler, 2010). How this example is imparted in interactions with religiously affiliated adults has not overtly been explored in the literature, but it may take the form of youth seeing a non-parental adult mentor attending Mass regularly, overtly living according to religious doctrine and religious moral teaching, and openly and confidently talking about their own religious experiences.

Another component of adult-youth interactions discussed in the mentoring literature is the role of a “challenger” (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2012). Challengers press the youth they interact with toward high achievement. “Challenging” is often described as being pushed out of one’s comfort zone. The young person is pushed a little further than the youth may have thought possible (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2012). Further, adults support youth by believing in them, advocating for them to other adults as well as advocating for the youth

against the youth's own insecurities or self-concept (Hurd et al., 2014). In secular settings, this may be encouraging youth to apply to jobs or programs that the youth is interested in. This may also take the form of pushing them to set high academic or sports goals and then holding them accountable to fulfilling the necessary steps to achieve those goals such as regularly studying or extra time in the weight room. In a religious mentoring, the challenger may challenge the youth to question or further explore ideals or beliefs the youth takes for granted. A challenger may also challenge the youth to explain why they believe what they believe, and/or encourage them to examine literature or videos that contradict those beliefs.

Interactions with adults likely play a crucial role in the religious journeys of Catholic-raised youth. Not all adults with whom youth come into contact with, however, play a positive role in their development (Nuesch-Olver, 2005; Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005). Adults may also provide a negative influence or negative experience. Even if youth have a majority of positive adult interactions in their lives, research suggests that negative experiences with adults may remain more salient than positive experiences (Rhodes et al., 2005). Negative experiences with adults have been shown to have a great influence on the mood and wellbeing of young adults, even if proportionally they had more positive than negative experiences with adults (Rook, 1999; as cited in Rhodes et al., 2005). Given that youth may retain the influence of negative experiences more readily than positive experiences, understanding how adults fail to support

and/or negatively influence young adults is essential to informing how adults can support youth.

There are some common characteristics of negatively rated adult-youth interactions: 1) a lack of or disproportional respect (Deutsch & Jones, 2008), 2) youth identify adults as awkward or not authentic (Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral, 2008), 3) a mismatch in background and/or interests between adult and youth (Deutsch & Jones, 2008; Sirin, Ryce, & Mir, 2009), 4) unethical or inappropriate behavior on the part of the adult (Dworkin & Larson, 2006; Nuesch-Olver, 2005), 5) adults who make unreasonable demands or expectations on the youth, and 6) adults who may not properly show their interest in the relationship (Futch Ehrlich, Deutsch, Fox, Johnson, & Varga, 2016).

### **The Lost Generation**

In the 1970's and 1980's, the Catholic Church in the United States, and elsewhere in the world, saw a significant decline in the number of traditional religious leaders and role models (priests, brothers, and sisters/nuns), weekly church attendance among laity, and a decreased interest among lay Catholics to learn and incorporate Church teachings (Smith & Denton, 2005). Catholic programs serving Catholic-raised youth such as Catholic schools, Catechism classes for public school educated Catholics, sports programs, social clubs, and other religious ministries were reaching a smaller percentage of Catholic-raised youth. However, possibly due to the Baby-boomer generations high birth rates, this decrease was not fully realized until 1975, when the Church commissioned

and published a survey titled, *Where Are the 6.6 Million?* (Paradi & Thompson, 1975).

The Paradi and Thompson (1975) study was commissioned to determine if out-of-school religious education (Sunday school) for public school attending Catholic-raised youth was increasing at the same rate registration at Catholic schools was decreasing. Simply put, if Catholic-raised youth are receiving their Catholic education in either a Catholic school or in an out-of-school weekly program then, as enrollment at Catholic schools decreased, those students should be seen being enrolled by their parents in out-of-school religious education classes. This was not the case. Instead, the report stated that in 1974 an estimated 6.6 million baptized Catholic-raised elementary and secondary age youth were not receiving formal religious education either in a school religion class or an out-of-school religion program. This 6.6 million estimate had increased from 3.1 million recorded in 1965 (Paradis & Thompson, 1975).

Post-Vatican II, many young people who were interested in engaging with their Catholicism, joined renewal movements within the Church such as “Search” and “Teens Encounter Christ,” as well as youth and campus ministry groups. However, those who remained interested and engaged, were often not given the doctrinal knowledge necessary to fully understand their developing Catholicism. Thus, according to scholars, when viewed through the lens of forming young adults who can transfer their Catholicism on to the next generations, this was an era in which the institution weakened (Smith, Longest, Hill, and Christoffersen, 2014). Counter intuitively, Catholics, who were once outcast and isolated

immigrant communities, started to become accepted by mainstream American culture. This acceptance led, to a weakening of the American's earlier transmission model:

The old system of Catholic faith transmission— which relied on concentrated Catholic residential neighborhoods, ethnic solidarity, strong Catholic schools, religious education classes designed to reinforce family and parish life, and 'thickly' Catholic cultures, practices, and rituals— had drastically eroded by the time this generation...came of age. Yet no alternative approach to effective intergenerational Catholic faith transmission had been devised and instituted to replace the old system— and indeed it is not clear that any such effective system has yet been put into place even today (Smith et al., 2014, p. 26).

Catholics raised between 1965 and 1980 are often considered the “lost generation,” a weakened, or in some cases broken, link in the transmission of the Catholic religious tradition from generation to generation (Smith et al., 2014). If this is indeed true, it may influence the number of Catholic adults who are comfortable enough and qualified enough to effectively guide and support modern Catholic-raised youth in their Catholic identity exploration and decision-making process.

### **Rationale**

Given the trend of drastically declining Catholic retention among Catholic-raised youth (Gray & Gautier, 2012; Lipka, 2015; Manhlos-Weber & Smith, 2018; McCarty & Vitek, 2018; Pew Research Group, 2009 & 2014) there is an urgent need to understand the sources of religious support modern youth receive. Though the youth mentorship literature often acknowledges youth ministers and religious adult figures as possible positive influences in the lives of youth, the behaviors of these adults are not explicitly explored but instead their presence is only mentioned when identified by youth. Understanding who the



adults are that intentionally or unintentionally find themselves present and influential during the religious identity formation of Catholic-raised youth could shine a better light on how young adults who remain or leave the Catholic Church come to their decisions.

Research on the influence of adult presence and support in religious formation has been promising (Dowling et al., 2004, Furrow & Wagener, 2004; Lanker & Issler, 2010; Nuesch-Olver, 2005; Smith & Snell 2009). However, the current literature has not fully examined the specific supporting and hindering roles adults play among youth, and how their presence influences the religious identity journey into young adulthood. In addition, current literature generally focuses on religion in general or broadly Christianity. To this researcher's knowledge, no research focusing specifically on the adults present in the lives of Catholic-raised young adults has been conducted.

The current qualitative study aimed to begin filling these gaps by collecting young adult's perceptions of adults present during their religious development and how they felt these adults supported, hindered, or otherwise influenced their religious formation within the Catholic Church. To better understand how parental and non-parental adults may aid in the religious development and retention of Catholic-raised youth, this dissertation aimed to a) identify the adults who Catholic-raised young adults view as influential in their religious identity development, b) explore how these adults may influence the religious identity development process of Catholic-raised young adults and c) discover what, if any, the characteristic and behavioral differences are between

the adults present in the lives of Catholic-raised Current-Catholics and Catholic-raised Previous-Catholics.

To address these research questions, in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with Catholic-raised college students of junior and senior standing. This sample included students who identified as Currently-Catholic as well as those who identified as Previously-Catholic so comparisons between adult profiles of Catholic-raised Currently-Catholic adults and Catholic-raised Previous-Catholic adults could be made. For the purpose of the present study, a combination of the Canon Law “Catholic by baptism” definition and self-identification was used. That is, if a person was baptized into the Catholic Church and currently identified as being affiliated with the Catholic Church, they were considered Catholic in this study.

Categorizing a participant’s religious affiliation as Catholic (within this study referred to as Currently-Catholic) does not assume they attend Mass or pray regularly, nor does it assume they adhere to all Catholic social and moral teachings. While this study will provide recommendations related to Catholic youth ministry which aims to fully engage teenagers and young adults in the life of the Catholic Church and all that entails (religious practice, parish community participation, religious belief, and a relationship with God), determining if that goal has been achieved beyond self-identifying as Currently-Catholic is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, affiliation should be seen as a first step. If someone in their early twenties is choosing to vocally identify as affiliated with

the Catholic Church, then that is a place to start the conversation about what ministry would best fit their needs.

Findings from this study will have implications for modern ministry workers and researchers as they work to meet the ministry needs of modern Catholic-raised youth. Identifying, describing, and comparing the adults Catholic-raised youth interact with during these formative years, described using their own words, is the first step in this process.

### **Research Questions**

1. Who are the adults present during the Catholic identity formation of Catholic-raised college students?
2. What are the characteristics of these adults?
3. What are the behaviors of these adults?
4. Are there differences in the characteristics or behaviors of adults present in the lives of Currently-Catholic and Previously-Catholic participants?

### **Methods**

This study used qualitative methods to examine who the adults are who are present during the religious identity formation process of Catholic-raised young adults (the process of deciding whether to affiliate with the Catholic Church and identify themselves as Catholic). Qualitative methods emphasize the importance of the participants' subjective view of their own experiences (e.g. experiences as and interactions with adults as a Catholic-raised youth; Creswell,

2013). An oral history narrative approach was used to interview college students about their subjective experiences (Creswell, 2013).

### **Sample and recruitment**

Two groups of college students who were raised Catholic were recruited for this study; 12 who currently identified as Catholic (Currently-Catholic) and 12 who no longer identified as Catholic (Previously-Catholic), for a total of 24 participants. Patton (2002) states that a sample has reached its necessary size when participants' answers start to become redundant. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggest saturation may be obtained in as few as 12 participants. As data was collected from two distinct populations: Catholic-raised Currently-Catholic college students and Catholic-raised Previously-Catholic, a sample of 24 participants was deemed sufficient to address the research questions.

Participants were required to meet the following study eligibility criteria: be a current college student in their junior or senior year, be 24 years of age or younger, have at least one Catholic parent who raised the student in the Roman Catholic religious tradition, and have received the Sacrament of Confirmation. Upperclassman status ensured participants have had enough experiences on a college campus to be able to speak to the structures and relationships within the institution that have influenced their religious affiliation in addition to their experience before university. One Catholic parent and completion of the Sacrament of Confirmation created a minimum standard of exposure to Catholic education and culture. No behavioral requirements, such as attending Mass weekly, were required to self-identify as Catholic. Participants who did not

currently identify as Catholic included: students who self-identified as Christian, spiritual but not religious, unsure, no religion, Agnostic, and Atheist.

Catholic-raised college students were recruited from an urban Catholic university: DePaul University. DePaul is a Catholic Vincentian university. According to 2014 freshman class summary, 45% of DePaul's incoming students identified as Catholic (Enrollment Summary, 2014). By 2016-2017, when interviews were conducted, this 2014 freshman class was in their Junior year. The campus has specific staff focused on Catholic ministry as well as strong interreligious services and community for non-religious students.

## **Materials**

**Prescreening questionnaire.** Potential participants filled out a prescreening questionnaire (Appendix A) to determine if they fit the inclusion criteria for the study as well as to help ensure a diverse sampling. The questionnaire included the following questions: age, year in school, current religious identity, if they were raised Catholic, if they received the sacrament of Confirmation, the religious identity of both parents/guardians, their gender, sexual orientation, race, and contact information if they fit the criteria.

**Demographic survey.** Upon arriving at their interviews, after reading the consent materials, participants filled out a demographic survey (Appendix B). This survey collected demographic information and asked specific questions about their experience growing up Catholic. These questions included rating how satisfied they were with their experience growing up Catholic, how often their parents/guardians practiced their religious in front of them, if they had at least one

non-parental/guardian adult who they could look to or ask about Catholicism, if that adult practiced their religion in front of them, how this person supported them, and if they feel they were given enough education about Catholicism to make an informed decision about their religion and if they were planning to marry within the Catholic Church. Once they completed the survey, the Growing up Catholic Narrative interview began.

**Interview protocol.** The oral history narrative approach to qualitative data collection gathers the personal stories of participants through an interview (Creswell, 2013). These narratives may focus on the life of one individual or a specific topic in the lives of a group of individuals such as individuals from a specific demographical group within a shared or similar experience (Creswell, 2013). Within the current study, the demographic group of interest was Catholic-raised college students and their life experience being raised within the Catholic Church in relation to their current religious identity. More specifically of interest were Catholic-raised youth's interactions with adults related to religion and how these adults may or may not have influenced their journey toward their current religious affiliation.

The narrative approach's defining factor is that the information relayed comes in the form of a story. As such, narrative data, like any book or novel has a beginning, middle, and end with the participant as the protagonist of their own story (Carter, 1993; Creswell, 2013). The data provided by the participant contained locations (e.g. home, church, school), other characters in the story (e.g. family, friends, influential adults), and defining moments in the journey of the

main character such as crossroads or major life events (e.g. graduating high school or the death of a parent; Carter, 1993; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). As the participant tells their story, they relayed their life experience within their Catholic upbringing and how they experienced that journey from beginning (exposure to religion in childhood), middle (religious experiences during adolescence), to end (the participant's current religious affiliation as a college student).

After filling out the demographic survey, participants were administered a narrative interview protocol (Appendix C), which was audio recorded and later transcribed. To start, the participant was asked to describe their current religious identity and what that means to them in their own words. Then the participants told their narratives. After the narrative was completed the researcher asked guiding and follow-up questions about the participant's narrative and about the studies research questions.

Before discussing their journey growing up within the Catholic Church, the interview protocol started with the identification of their current religious identity and a description of what that identity meant to them. This initial identification and description were to provide an "end point" to their narrative that they could center their narrative around. To help aid, without guiding the participant's narration, participants were given a timeline (Appendix D) to visually aid in the recall of significant events and or dates during their life as a Catholic-raised youth; beginning with their education and upbringing during

childhood, their experiences in high school and their experience in college up to the current date.

The telling of the participant's narrative was elicited in an intentionally loosely structured section of the interview to make sure the information provided was, from the participant's subjective perspective, the most relevant components of their story. The researcher refrained from asking questions or making comments except where it is necessary to demonstrate continued interest in the participant's story or when asked a question directly by the participant. This section was complete when the participant had finished describing the events that led them to their current religious identity.

After the participant completed the telling of their narrative, the researcher entered the semi-structured questioning section of the protocol. In this section, the researcher asked questions to better understand the participant's story and follow up on any parts of the story that needed clarifying or expanding. In addition, the researcher asked the participant questions about their narrative related to the study's research questions. For example, during the narrative part of the interview, the researcher took note of and made a list of all adults or groups of adults the participant mentioned. In section three, the researcher then asked for further detail about each of these adults or groups of adults. The participant was also asked to discuss how they felt these adults influenced their current religious identity and how the adult made this influence. In addition to the adults mentioned during the narrative, the participant was prompted to list and describe any other adults who they may not have already mentioned who they felt made a



substantial impact, either positive or negative, on their religious identity. The interview closed by asking if there was anything else they felt was relevant about their experience being raised within the Catholic Church that they have not already mentioned. When the participant felt their story was complete, the researcher thanked them for their time and turned off the recorder.

**The researcher.** In addition to valuing and encouraging the subjective perspective of the participant in the research process, qualitative research also acknowledges the unavoidable influence the researcher's own perspectives and identity play within the research experience (Creswell, 2013; Way, 2005). As an active player in the data collection and analysis process, it is important for the researcher to identify aspects of their identity that may influence their perspective and interpretation of data. For this reason, I provide a summary of my background and experience related to the research topic.

In my personal life, I was raised in the Roman Catholic tradition by my mother. We attended Mass every weekend until I was 18, and I participated in Sunday school classes from 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. During high school and most of my undergraduate college experience I considered myself a non-practicing Catholic. I reconnected with the Catholic Church during a semester abroad in Rome my junior year of college. After meeting two American seminarians early on in that semester, I started attending daily Mass with them and their friends. Through their guidance, the introduction of Catholic friends into my social network, and many long arguments about Church doctrine and social teachings, I returned to the United States a practicing Catholic with a passion for the importance of youth

ministry. I am now an active member of my university's Catholic community and teach a Sunday school class on the weekends for middle school students.

Professionally, I spent a year as a youth ministry intern with a high school youth group before beginning my graduate work. Through my graduate studies, I have worked with Catholic and Christian organizations as an external evaluation consultant and spent my master's degree program exploring the roles of Catholic permanent deacons and homeless spirituality.

Given my background both personally and professionally with this community and subject, I have biases. I cannot remove myself from my own subjective experience (Way, 2005). As such, it was important to reflect on my biases before, during, and after the study. As an active Catholic, Catholic youth ministry worker, and a researcher who studies Catholic communities, I place great importance on the role a person's religion plays in their daily lives. However, I also acknowledge that the extent to which individuals identify with a religion and their participation in religious activities may differ from my own.

As Way (2005) discusses in a reflection on qualitative analysis, researchers must be careful not to place their own history and experiences on the participant. As such, I strove to be open to the possibility of data that at first glance seemed impossible or unexpected based on my own experience. This was why I chose qualitative methods to collect my data. By allowing participants to tell their stories instead of answering a battery of survey questions, the possibility of experiences different than those I may expect or predict could be told (Way, 2005). I strove to probe deeply into comments and experiences I did not

understand to ensure participant's experiences were represented in the data as accurately and completely as possible. I also continued to reflect on my expectations and interpretations throughout data collection using memoing to reflect on what I was and was not hearing so as to explore those ideas in future interviews (Way, 2005). In addition to consulting with my coding team, I also discussed questions that arose related to data interpretation with my dissertation committee chair.

It was also important to reflect not only on how my biases may influence my interpretation of data but how my presence as the interviewer could influence the data collection process. As an active member of the DePaul Catholic campus community, I personally was acquainted with both Current-Catholic and Previous-Catholic participants (10 Currently-Catholics and 1 Previous-Catholic). My prominence in the community helped my ability to recruit participants and provided me with a sense of credibility and trustworthiness as participants shared stories of their religious journeys that were deeply personal. Inversely, I was concerned Previous-Catholics may be less likely to be honest about their negative experience or to share opinions they thought may offend me or make me judge them.

Because of this concern, I strove to show that I was trustworthy by providing an active but neutral listening style during interviews. I used active listening techniques such as verbal and physical encouragement equally for pro-Catholic and anti-Catholic rhetoric and strove to ask probing and follow up questions in areas of their personal story that were not just related to pro-Catholic

experiences (such as experiences with “logical” math teachers and experiences at Buddhist temples). I also strove to not show any encouragement for particular answers through my clothing choices during interviews. I generally wear religious medals and own religious clothing. All external identifiers of my religious affiliation were removed from my wardrobe and interview space during recruitment and data collection.

### **Procedures**

**Recruitment.** Catholic-raised college students were recruited using flyers, emails, in-person presentations, and Facebook posts. Flyers were posted in campus buildings with Student Affairs’ approval. Emails were sent to teachers of all senior seminars, junior seminars, as well as teachers of upper level classes where upperclassman status was the majority or required. The emails requested that instructors forward the email onto their students, distribute the flyers in class, or allow an in-class recruitment speech done by the researcher or research team. Recruitment flyers were posted in the “Class of” 2017, 2018, and 2019 Facebook groups on a bi-monthly schedule. A recruitment flyer was also posted on the Catholic Campus Ministry Facebook page on 2 occasions in the spring of 2017.

Participants were selected using a two-step sampling technique; criterion (Patton, 2002) and then stratified purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). A criterion sampling technique was used to ensure participants met the inclusion criteria needed to participate in the study. A stratified purposeful sampling technique was used to ensure the inclusion of a diverse range of experiences such as those of different racial backgrounds, genders and sexual orientations.

To ensure participants met the inclusion criteria, potential participants who showed interest, filled out the pre-screening questionnaire (Appendix A). A link to the pre-screening questionnaire was included in all recruitment material or presentations. Potential participants followed the link which opened with an informed consent that was followed by the screening questions. Criterion sampling questions included: religions of both parents/guardians, if they were confirmed in the Catholic Church, and what year in college they were. The list of participants that met the inclusion criteria was then subjected to the stratified purposeful sampling phase of selection. These questions included: what religion, if any, they identified with currently, their gender, race, and sexual orientation.

According to Pew's Religious Landscape study (Pew, 2014), 54% of American Catholics were female and 46% were male. Fifty-nine percent of American Catholics were White, 34% were Latinx, 3% were Black, 3% were Asian, and 3% were another or of mixed racial background. Pew did not have a percentage of LGBTQA and gender non-conforming Catholics in the United States, but a study of LGBTQA Americans found 14% of the sample identified as Catholic (Pew, 2013). These percentages were mapped on to the Catholic and non-Catholic groups to guide participant selection from qualifying potential participants (Table 1).

*Table 1. Demographic diversity of study sample compared to Pew 2014 demographics of Roman Catholics in the United States and the US Census*

	<i>n</i>	%	Pew %	US Census 2010 %
<b>Gender Identity</b>				
Female	15	62	54	50.8
Male	8	33	46	49.2
Other	1	4.2	-	-
<b>Sexual Identity</b>				
Heterosexual	19	80	86	-
LGBTQA	5	20	14	-
Gay	2	8	-	-
Lesbian	0	0	-	-
Bisexual	1	4	-	-
Asexual	1	4	-	-
Pansexual	1	4	-	-
<b>Racial Identity</b>				
White	12	50	59	76.9
Latinx	8	33.3	34	17.8
Multi-racial	2	8.3	3	2.6
Black	1	4.2	3	13.3
Asian	1	4.2	3	5.7

*Note.* Sexuality percentages based on the article; A survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, Experiences and Values in Changing Times (Pew, 2013). All other Pew percentages based on the Catholic sub-data from the Religious Landscape Study (Pew, 2014). US Census data based on the US Census website:

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045216>.

**Data collection.** Participants who met the screening criteria were contacted by email or phone and invited to schedule a time to participate in an interview about their religious experiences before and during college. All interviews were performed by the primary researcher and took place in the primary researcher's office. The interviewer obtained informed consent from the participant and reminded them the conversation would be recorded using a digital audio recorder. Participants were scheduled for 90-minute slots to meet with the primary investigator for their interview. This time period was to include informed consent, the paper survey, and the interview. Interviews ranged from 27 minutes

to 94 minutes and the average interview length was 60.37. The average Currently-Catholic interview was 66.5 minutes and the average Previously-Catholic interview length was 53.75 minutes.

Data collection started in the Spring academic quarter of 2017 after the project was proposed and institutional review board approval had been obtained. Data collection ended in the Fall academic quarter of 2017. Twenty participants were recruited and interviewed in Spring 2017, two participants were interviewed in Summer 2017, and two participants were interviewed in Fall 2017.

**Data processing.** Recorded interviews were uploaded on to a protected file folder accessible only by research team members. Interviews were transcribed by a team of volunteer undergraduate research assistants. The transcription team was trained and supervised by the primary researcher. All data transcription took place in the lab space to protect the confidentiality of the participant's data. The data collected from surveys and interviews was confidential and was de-identified during the data analysis process. Each interviewee was referred to by their number, and the only people who knew participant's identity were the interviewer and the transcription team. An attempt was made to only pair transcribers with audio recordings of people they did not know. If a transcriber started on a recording and recognized the voice, they stopped, reported to the primary investigator and that participant's audio was assigned to another transcriber so as to respect the sensitive nature of the interview's content. Names of individuals mentioned during the interview were also altered. The transcription team was required to sign a written pledge of confidentiality not to share participants'

identities or interview responses with others. Verbal consent was obtained during interviews so there were no signed consent forms to file.

### **Data analysis**

Interview transcripts were coded and inductively analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Kelle, 2007). Modified grounded theory analysis is a two-step method to developing a coding framework. Coding began with a traditional bottom-up phase of reviewing the transcripts and ended with a top-down phase of connecting data to previous theory. After the development of the coding framework, the framework was entered onto NVivo coding program for further analysis.

Step one, the bottom-up phase, allowed codes to “emerge” from the data inductively, instead of “forcing” data to fit into pre-existing theories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Starting with a bottom-up approach to coding was ideal given the lack of previous theory applicable to these specific research questions in a religious context. This process began with grouping relevant text into repeating ideas. Then these repeating ideas were grouped with other repeating ideas into larger overarching themes. Within each of these themes, if separate but related themes emerged, these were categorized as sub-themes (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Once codes had been discovered in phase one, phase two consisted of linking relevant data to the research questions, relevant theory, and to common sense categories (Kelle, 2007). One component of the top-down phase was using the research questions to determine which themes generated during the bottom-up



process were relevant to the dissertation's aims. A second component of the top-down phase was using pre-existing theoretical mentoring frameworks to inform the analysis and coding of the data. Traditional grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) requires themes be allowed to emerge naturally from the data without the researcher forcing theories onto the data. However, modified ground theory (Kelle, 2007) allows for the use of existing theories if the inclusion of the theory expands, instead of restricts, the scope of the data analysis. To do this, Kelle (2007) suggests using existing theoretical categories for investigative rather than definitive purposes. In practice, this was accomplished by using theories with low empirical content. For example, the secular mentoring literature describes supportive behaviors that can be of an instructional (Karcher & Hansen, 2014; Nakkula & Harris, 2014) and/or emotional nature (Bayer, Grossman, & DuBois, 2015; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011). This definition lacks empirical content in that it does not define what this supportive behavior must look like, only examples of what it could look like in a secular context. Because of the lack of empirical content, these supportive behavior concepts aided in expanding the breath of the coding by drawing the researcher's attention to potentially pertinent phenomena instead of restricting the coding by limiting what was classified as adult behavior. A third component of the top-down phase was the use of common sense categories. Kelle (2007) suggests the use of common sense categories, which can be concluded from the study's context. In this case, ideas such as "types of mentoring support" are considered common sense categories because the overall study was designed to assess how adult-youth

relationships play into developing and forming the participants' current religious identities.

A team of seven undergraduate research assistants (RAs) was trained in qualitative research methods before working with any study data. Each RA was given three or four transcripts to code over the course of the Fall 2017 academic quarter. Each transcript was read five times by each RA and two times by the primary investigator. Coding was done in Microsoft Word for round one through five and then entered into the NVivo qualitative software.

Undergraduate RAs read the transcript first simply to read the story and take note of ideas present in the transcript. During their second reading, RAs read specifically to mark adults, locations, life events, and experiences that influenced the person's religious journey. This open coding phase involved grouping ideas from the first reading into common themes within the individual transcript. Their third reading, included having the code book open while coding. The code book evolved over the course of data analysis. RAs were instructed during this third reading to determine if any of their codes from round two matched the code book and to change the wording of their codes, if applicable to match the code book. If they identified themes that were not in the code book, they highlighted these and brought them to the attention of the primary investigator during their fourth reading, which was done with the primary investigator. These themes were, where applicable, added to the code book. During their fourth reading of a transcript, RAs met with the primary investigator and went through the transcript line by line, comparing codes and resolving any discrepancies. The fifth and final

time RAs read the transcript was after all other coding had been completed to determine if codes that had been added to the code book after the transcript had been reviewed with the primary investigator were applicable and therefore needed to be added. This process created the finalized coding for each transcript that were then entered into NVivo for analysis.

Once the coded transcripts and the code book were entered into NVivo, NVivo was used to determine the prevalence of the themes overall; how many times a theme was mentioned within the entire dataset as well as the number of participants who discussed the theme were taken into account. Themes with low prevalence were examined to determine if they were indeed described only as that theme or if that theme was similar to another more prevalent theme. If so, the themes were combined for a more universal theme (such as the themes jazzy, upbeat, and vibrant being combined into vibrant). After this phase was complete, themes were grouped into overarching themes (such as mother, father, and grandparents being grouped as “Family”).

Undergraduate RAs also created a list of adults (called an Adult Profile) for each participant. This profile collected type of adult relationship, adult’s religion, and Mass attendance (if Catholic), characteristic themes and behavior themes for each adult or grouping of adults mentioned by each participant. This information about the adults mentioned were then entered into an SPSS file for analysis.

**Triangulation and credibility of findings.** The credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings was of the utmost importance and steps to ensure the credibility of the findings began at the beginning of the study and were intentionally pursued throughout the study. In the preparatory stages of the project the researcher used triangulation of theory to form the research questions. Additional triangulation was used in the sampling procedures (triangulation of data sources) and during data analysis (triangulation through multiple analysts) (Patton, 1999).

When performing the literature review to inform the study's research questions, multiple disciplines were explored. Literature from sociological qualitative research of both Catholic and non-Catholic participants was sampled, mentoring research was explored, and mass quantitative phone surveys done by research institutes were also explored. This sampling of multiple fields aided the researcher in focusing in on the questions that continued to be raised regardless of which field was exploring the topic.

In addition to Triangulation through theory, Patton (1999), also discusses the importance of triangulation through source. This means collecting data from sources that are different to paint a more complete picture of a concept through both the consistencies and inconsistencies between multiple groups. Patton (1999) provided two ways this may be done; by a) including "negative cases" and b) by collecting data either from different physical locations or different times. In Patton's context, negative cases refer to the importance of collecting data in an evaluation from both participants and non-participants or people who opt out of a

program at the beginning or in the middle. In the context of this study, as detailed above, the researcher included both Catholic-raised college students who identified as Currently-Catholic and Catholic-raised college students who identified as Previously-Catholic. Thus, the experiences of being raised Catholic was heard both from the perspective of Catholic-raised students who had opted to remain Catholic in young adulthood as well as from Catholic-raised student who had opted out of the Catholic tradition. To further decrease the influence of a specific demographics experience, as mentioned above, participants were recruited in a way that optimized the diversity of the sample within the confines of the inclusion criteria (Table 1) with special attention to gender, racial, and sexuality diversity within the sample.

Finally, the researcher used triangulation through multiple analysts (Patton, 1999). The primary researcher enlisted a seven-person team of secondary coders who read and coded the transcripts. The primary researcher read and coded all transcripts. The secondary coders each coded three to four transcripts on their own and then, throughout the quarter, met with the primary researcher to compare their codes and create a finalized draft of codes for each transcript.

**Quantitative Analyses.** While qualitative data collection and analysis typical focus on reporting themes, quantitative analysis may be used to compare the frequency of themes (Onwuegbuize & Teddlie, 2007). Mann-Whitney U tests were used to compare the median number of adults described by Currently-Catholic and Previously-Catholic participants regarding the types of adults, adult characteristic themes, and adult behavior themes. The Mann-Whitney U test was

chosen because it is a non-parametric test that compares the difference between two independent groups (i.e., Currently and Previously-Catholic participants) when the dependent variable is continuous (i.e., number of adults) but not normally distributed as in the study's sample (Field, 2009).

## Results

**Participant demographics.** Twenty-four Catholic-raised young adults were interviewed (Table 1). Participants ranged in age from 19 – 25 years old ( $M = 20.83$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ). All participants were upperclassman; 58% ( $n = 14$ ) were juniors and 41.7% ( $n = 10$ ) were seniors. Of these participants, 62.5% ( $n = 15$ ) identified as female, 33% ( $n = 8$ ) identified as male, and 4.2% ( $n = 1$ ) identified as gender fluid. Fifty percent ( $n = 12$ ) of the participants were White, 33.3% ( $n = 8$ ) were Latinx, 4.2% ( $n = 1$ ) were Black, 4.2% ( $n = 1$ ) were Asian, and 8.3% ( $n = 2$ ) were multi-racial. Eighty percent ( $n = 19$ ) identified as heterosexual, 8% ( $n = 2$ ) identified as gay, 4% ( $n = 1$ ) identified as asexual, 4% ( $n = 1$ ) identified as bisexual, and 4% ( $n = 1$ ) identified as pansexual.

**Current religious identity and practice.** As detailed in Table 2, half of participants identified as Currently-Catholic ( $n = 12$ ), and the other half identified as Previously-Catholic ( $n = 12$ ). Of the Previously-Catholic group, 16.7% ( $n = 4$ ) identified as Agnostic, 12.5% ( $n = 3$ ) identified as Atheist, 8.2% ( $n = 2$ ) did not identify with any religious group, 4.2% ( $n = 1$ ) identified as not religious, 4.2% ( $n = 1$ ) identified as spiritual but not religious, and 4.2% ( $n = 1$ ) identified as Christian.

*Table 2. Current religious identity and religious practice of participants*

	Full Sample (N = 24)		Currently Catholic (n = 12)		Previously Catholic (n = 12)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Religious identity</b>						
Currently Catholic	12	50	12	100	0	0
Previously Catholic	12	50	0	0	12	100
Agnostic	4	16.7	0	0	4	33.3
Atheist	3	12.5	0	0	3	25
Don't identify with any religion	2	8.2	0	0	2	16.7
Christian	1	4.2	0	0	1	8.3
Not Religious	1	4.2	0	0	1	8.3
Spiritual but not religious	1	4.2	0	0	1	8.3
<b>Mass attendance frequency</b>						
Every Sunday	8	33.3	8	66.7	0	0
Every few months	5	20.8	3	25	2	16.7
Once or Twice a Year	5	20.8	0	0	5	41.7
Never	5	20.8	1	8.3	4	33.3
Every day	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unanswered	1	4.2	0	0	1	8.3
<b>Non-Catholic religious service attendance</b>						
Never	15	62.5	5	41.7	10	83.3
Once or Twice a Year	6	25	5	41.7	1	8.3
Every few months	1	4.2	1	8.3	0	0
Twice a month	1	4.2	1	8.3	0	0
Weekly	0	0	0	0	0	0
Every day	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unanswered	1	4.2	0	0	1	8.3
<b>Sacrament of Confession frequency</b>						
Never	11	45.8	2	16.7	9	75
Once or Twice a Year	6	25	4	33.3	2	16.7
Every few months	4	16.7	4	33.3	0	0
Every week	1	4.2	1	8.3	0	0
Twice a month	1	4.2	1	8.3	0	0
Unanswered	1	4.2	0	0	1	8.3
<b>Planning on a Catholic service if/when they marry</b>						
Yes	12	50	10	83.3	2	16.7
No	3	12.5	0	0	3	25
Unsure	8	33.3	2	16.7	6	50
Unanswered	1	4.2	0	0	1	8.3

One-third (33.3%,  $n = 8$ ) attend Catholic Mass at least once a week, 20.8% ( $n = 5$ ) attend Mass every few months, 20.8% ( $n = 5$ ) attend Mass once to twice a year, and 20.8% ( $n = 5$ ) never attend Mass. Regarding non-Catholic religious service attendance, 4.20% ( $n = 1$ ) attended service twice a month, 4.20% ( $n = 1$ ) attended service every few months, 25% ( $n = 6$ ) attended service once or twice a year, and 62.50% ( $n = 15$ ) never attended non-Catholic religious services.

Participants reported their current Sacrament of Reconciliation frequency; 4.20% ( $n = 1$ ) confessed once a week, 4.20% ( $n = 1$ ) confessed twice a month, 16.70% ( $n = 4$ ) confessed every few months, 25% ( $n = 6$ ) confessed once or twice a year, 45.80% ( $n = 11$ ) never go to confession and 4.2% ( $n = 1$ ) did not respond to the question. None of the participants were married. When asked about marriage in the future, half of participants ( $n = 12$ ) were confident they would have a Catholic wedding, 33.3% ( $n = 8$ ) were unsure if they would have a Catholic wedding, 12.5% ( $n = 3$ ) said they would not have a Catholic wedding and 4.2% ( $n = 1$ ) did not respond to the question.

**Catholic upbringing descriptives.** As detailed in Table 3, all participants ( $n = 24$ ) were raised within the Catholic Church by at least one Catholic parent/guardian. House-holds with 2 Catholic parents, made up 83.3% ( $n = 20$ ) of families, and 16% ( $n = 4$ ) of participants lived in an interreligious family. When asked how often their Catholic parent(s) practiced their religion in the home, 33.3% ( $n = 8$ ) said very often, 33.3% ( $n = 8$ ) said often, 20.8% ( $n = 5$ ) said sometimes, 4.2% ( $n = 1$ ) said rarely, and 8.3% ( $n = 2$ ) said very rarely. Participants were asked about their satisfaction with their Catholic upbringing,



12.5% ( $n = 3$ ) of participants said they were very satisfied, 33.3% ( $n = 8$ ) were satisfied, 41.7 ( $n = 10$ ) were neutral about their Catholic upbringing, and 12.5% ( $n = 3$ ) were unsatisfied, and 0% ( $n = 0$ ) were very unsatisfied. Participants also rated if they felt they had had enough Catholic education to make an informed decision on whether or not to be Catholic, 70.7% ( $n = 17$ ) felt they had had enough Catholic religious education, 8.3% ( $n = 2$ ) felt they had not had enough education to make an informed decision, and 21% ( $n = 5$ ) were unsure if they had.

*Table 3. Catholic upbringing of participants statistics for the full sample and religious identity subsamples*

	Full Sample ( $N = 24$ )		Currently Catholic ( $n = 12$ )		Previously Catholic ( $n = 12$ )	
	$N$	%	$N$	%	$N$	%
Raised as Catholic	24	100	12	100	12	100
2 Catholic parents	20	83.3	12	100	8	66.7
1 Catholic parent	4	16.7	0	0	4	33.3
How often parents practiced in front of participant						
Very Often	8	33.3	6	50	2	16.7
Often	8	33.3	3	25	5	41.7
Sometimes	5	20.8	2	16.7	3	25
Rarely	1	4.2	0	0	1	8.3
Very Rarely	2	8.3	1	8.3	1	8.3
Received the Sacrament of Confirmation						
Yes	24	100	12	100	12	100
No	0	0	0	0	0	0
Satisfaction with Catholic upbringing						
Very Satisfied	3	12.5	2	16.7	1	8.3
Satisfied	8	33.3	8	66.7	0	0
Neutral	10	41.7	2	16.7	8	66.7
Unsatisfied	3	12.5	0	0	3	25
Very Unsatisfied	0	0	0	0	0	0
Had enough Catholic education to decide on identity						
Yes	17	70.7	10	83.3	7	58.3
No	2	8.3	1	8.3	1	8.3
Unsure	5	21	1	8.3	4	33.3

### Research question 1: Who are the Adults?

In total, participants described 275 adults they believed had influenced their religious identity formation. Participants described on average 12.54 ( $SD = 4.60$ , range = 3-20) adults during their interviews. These influential adults fell into six categories: 1) family adults, 2) parish adults, 3) school adults, 4) religious event adults, 5) large groups/communities of adults, and 6) other adults (i.e., adults not met in any of the previous five settings). Descriptive statistics of adult type can be found in Table 4 for the full sample as well as broken down by religion subgroup.

*Table 4. Adults identified within the full sample and the religious identity subsamples*

Type of Adult	Full Sample ( $N = 24$ )		Currently Catholic ( $n = 12$ )		Previously Catholic ( $n = 12$ )	
	$N$	%	$n$	%	$N$	%
Family	75	27.3	33	22.61	42	32.56
Parents	41		18		23	
Extended Family	34		15		19	
Parish	79	28.7	46	31.52	33	25.58
Consecrated Adults						
Priest	24		15		9	
Deacon	4		1		3	
Nun	7		3		4	
Brother	1		1		0	
Lay Adults						
CCD Director	1		0		1	
CCD Teacher	27		12		15	
Parish Ministry Staff	15		14		1	
School	70	25.5	36	24.67	34	26.36
Pre-University						
Pre-University Teachers	34		17		17	
After school program leader	5		0		5	
University						
University Staff	2		1		1	
Professor	17		8		9	

Campus Ministry staff (Catholic)	10		10		0	
Campus Ministry staff (Non-Catholic)	2		0		2	
Other Adults	18	6.5	10	6.8	8	6.21
Baby-sitter	2		2		0	
God-parent/Confirmation Sponsor	7		3		4	
Family Friend	1		1		0	
Parent of a friend	4		2		2	
Medium	1		0		1	
Doctor/Therapist	2		1		1	
Church ministry staff (Non-Catholic)	1		1		0	
Religious Event Adults	13	4.7	12	8.23	1	0.77
Mission Trip leader	4		4		0	
Retreat leader	9		8		1	
Groups	20	7.3	9	6.17	11	8.52
Community Members	1		1		0	
Parish Community Members	13		6		7	
Church members at Non-Catholic church	2		1		1	
Home country population	2		1		1	
Different Culture	2		0		2	
Total	275		146		129	

**Family adults.** Family members made up 27.3% ( $N = 75$ ) of influential adults discussed. These adults fit into two groups: parents and extended family. The parents consisted of the mother and father. All participants discussed their parents in relation to their religious upbringing and formation as either a positive or negative influence. When discussing parents, participants told stories and described their parents individually but also discussed them as a unit. One participant described their mother's role in their Catholic upbringing:

My mom was very adamant about don't pray for like a toy, pray for like the courage to, you know, go to school at some point or pray for the strength to do well and things.

Other participants noted extended family members who were involved in their religious upbringing, such as their aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Similarly, to the parents, grandparents were both discussed as a unit as well as individuals.

For example, a participant discussing their grandparents stated,

I actually live with my Italian grandparents on my Mom's side who- they don't know I'm gay. I'm- they're not stupid but, they- like I said, super- they're still in the faith. They go to church all the time.

**Parish adults.** Parish adults made up 28.7% ( $N = 79$ ) of influential adults discussed by participants. These adults were individuals or groups of individuals with whom the participant interacted at their home parish(es). Parish adults fell into two groups: consecrated parish adults and lay parish adults.

Consecrated parish adults included priests, deacons, nuns (parish nun or missionary nun), and religious brothers whom the participant met within the parish context that were either stationed at the parish or visiting for a short period of time. Apart from the missionary nuns, these consecrated parish adults were stationed at the participant's parish and therefore had the opportunity to interact with the participant over a long period of time. For example, one participant described interacting with their parish's deacon by stating, "We found a really good church and the Deacon was like, awesome, he'd come say hi to us before church every week."

The missionary nuns were missionaries who visited the participant's parish once or twice to speak to the parish during the weekend Masses to ask for donations to support the ministries of their order or organization. These

missionaries were memorable to participants because of their intense lifestyle but did not interact one-on-one with the participant. A participant gave the following account of listening to a missionary nun speak at her parish:

I remember there being a missionary when I was like 6 that came to the church. Um, and I thought that was super cool, that she was able to go out and that she could help people and all these like places that people need much more help than like we did. Um, and I really liked that.

It is also important to note that the consecrated females in this study are referred to as nuns as that is how the participants referred to them. However, while these adult women were referred to as nuns, because none of them lived a cloistered lifestyle, they were most likely mislabeled “sisters”. Sisters live out their religious vows out in the world through active ministry and evangelization instead of pursuing lives of prayer and contemplation within a monastery.

Lay parish adults were non-consecrated adults who worked at or volunteered at the participant’s parish community. These lay parish adults consisted of Catechism staff (teachers and director) and parish ministry staff (youth group leaders and choir leaders).

Catechism teachers referred to one or more adult volunteers teaching the first grade through eighth or ninth grade Catechism classes at the participant’s parish. These teachers were volunteers such as community members, parents of the participant’s friends, the participant’s own parent, college students, or high school students. One participant described her relationship with her confirmation teacher; “One of my confirmation teachers ended up being my sponsor for my confirmation and so I look up to her.”

However, not all interactions with Catechism staff were positive. One participant discussed their interactions with their Catechism director who oversaw the Catechism teachers; “The program director for Sunday school... I remember her specifically.”

Parish Ministry Staff referred to one of more adult employees or volunteers at the parish who ministered to the youth and teens at the parish outside of Catechism classes such as youth group leaders or through church choir. For example, one participant described the role his choir leader played in his life:

I'd say the biggest faith influence was our... high school choir [leader], um, and she has definitely been one of, I guess the few people... that I'd be able to talk to about faith and kind of have discussions about why the Church believes what we believe and kind of have debates on Church teaching.

**School adults.** Influential school adults made up 25.5% ( $N = 70$ ) of total adults mentioned. School adults refer to individuals or groups of individuals the participant interacted with while at school. These adults consisted of pre-university teachers/staff and university teachers/staff. When discussing pre-university school adults, participants mentioned interactions with elementary school teachers and high school teachers in the classroom. For example, one participant described the frustrating experience of interacting regularly with teachers at his school:

...in school, none of like, really, and- it's really frustrating, 'cause really none of the teachers, with like one exception, 'cause they give you religion classes, they weren't really even giving rel- they knew nothing about- they literally did not know what they were talking about. Few of them did. They were practicing, some of them have a lot of faith, but they didn't know what they were teaching...

Another participant, discussed relationships with afterschool program leaders where they spent their afternoons while their parents were at work:

I don't know how I forgot this but, at the afterschool program there's this women...who...was like the reading director... And like, I'm super close with her. And I remember, I found out in middle school that she was an Atheist.

Participants continued to be influenced by the adults around them when they went to university. These consisted of: university staff, professors, Catholic campus ministry staff, and Non-Catholic campus ministry staff. All university adults were employees of the university as compared to volunteers.

University staff were one or more adults employed by the university in a non-teaching and non-ministry role. For example, one participant stated "There's a staff person that I work with... and she is like a woman of God, like through and through til the end..."

Professors were adults employed by the university who interacted with the participant in the classroom. One participant described the influence their professor had on their understanding of other religions:

Then I get to college, um, my first quarter of college...I had an amazing professor... and it was really eye opening because I really started to understand that there are different faiths and that they're all kind of just different stories...

Catholic campus ministry staff were one of more adults employed by the university's Catholic ministry office:

I had this conversation with [a campus ministry staff member], and they told me something that I- still stuck with me, um... [they] mentioned that all religions are different pathways to God. Right? So I took that to heart... so I'll go into [other religion's events/services] and learn about other religions, also, um, know what other...people's journey looks like.

Non-Catholic campus ministry staff adults employed by the university's ministry staff ministering to the Non-Catholic student body. One participant described their Protestant pastor by stating, "[He] is always a wonderful guy..."

and you know I've never really seen that, like, um, I never got to really be around like a minister or a pastor that much.”

**Religious event adults.** Some participants spoke of influential experiences going on retreats, mission trips and service trips through their parish, through school, or on their own. The events may have taken place at the parish, in their city, or in another state or country. These retreat and service trip leaders made up 4.7% ( $N = 13$ ) of total adults mentioned. Religious event adults refer to the adult leaders that participants interacted with while on these trips/at these events. Religious event adults include: mission/service trip leaders and retreat leaders.

Mission/Service trip leaders were an adult who ran or was involved in the organizing of a trip centered on religious service that the participant attended. For example, one participant stated:

I went on another service trip... and that for me changed the way I approach religion altogether... [the group leader] tells us “you know, I want you to know that your faith experience is your own, but I think you should also know that this idea of church being like the only place where you can praise and worship God is so, just outdated. Church is wherever you are surrounded by people that you love... and that to me was like “oh my God, this makes sense, I love it”. Um, and I felt this renewed energy for approaching my faith.

Retreat leaders were an adult who ran or was involved in the organizing of a religious retreat the participant attended. For example, one participant described the bond she formed with her group leader on a high school retreat:

... [it] was like the biggest retreat of the school... Um, my leader...I'm still like really close to her kind of and my group as well, um, because of things that we shared, things that we've been through...there was really like no secrets there. [laughs].



**Other Adults.** Participants also interacted with influential adults outside the family, school, and parish setting. These adults made up 6.5% ( $N = 18$ ) of the total adults mentioned. These other adults consisted of: parents of friends, mediums, doctors/therapists, babysitters, family friends, and confirmation sponsors/godparents.

Parents of friend were adults whose child was friends with the participant. The participant may have interacted with them in their home or through another activity the parent volunteered at. One participant discussed interacting with her best friend's mom: "And then also like one of my best friend's mom... She is also like, she is like super Catholic. [laugh] Um, usually when I was around her we would like, pray and stuff."

One participant commonly used a Medium to talk to her mother who was deceased. While they only have spoken a handful of times over the past few years, the participant described the influence of the medium's presence in her life:

Yeah, I think especially conversations I've had with [the medium] um before he dives into kind of contacting the spirits is...he... made me feel like there were other energies and other entities that- there isn't just one supreme being that makes all these decisions...

A participant also spoke of positive and negative experiences they had while being treated by therapists:

So, yeah, so I just like had a psychiatrist um, a therapist...she taught me it's okay to believe what I want to believe. Um, and like ideas change, so, like, what I believe now will probably be different from what I believe when I'm like fifty. And it's definitely different from what I believed when I was like fifteen.

Some participants discussed the important of their childhood babysitters. Babysitters were non-blood related adults who were responsible for the care of the participant while their parents worked. These babysitters often spent a large

amount of time with the participant over several years and acted almost as a second mother or additional family member. As one participant stated, a babysitter or nanny may have daily access to the participant:

Um, so we had a baby sitter whose main job was babysitting. Um [sigh] yeah and she did a lot of raising me I think of her as a second mother um... And uh yeah, she taught me most of my prayers, um...like especially the daily prayers that I try to say when I remember.

Family friends were non-blood related adult who had a close relationship with the participant and/or their parents. One participant described her “aunt” who was really her mom’s best friend:

Not really technically my aunt, but like my mom’s like best friend from high school, she’s Lutheran so I went to a few of their services as well, and I was like-uh, I remember asking a lot of questions about like the differences between like the Lutheran and the Catholic, um, faith, and like the Church and all that.

God-parent/Confirmation sponsors were relatives or non-related adult who has been asked to take on, and accepted, the task of helping the parents of the participant with the Catholic religious education and formation of the participant. There are usually 2 god-parents (one female, and one male) assigned by the parents at the participant’s baptism and then one of these adults may be asked by the participant to be their Confirmation Sponsor or a third adult may be asked to be the Confirmation Sponsor. Some participants referred to both their God-parents and Confirmation Sponsors as “god-parents” interchangeably. For example, one participant described her godparents:

Um, and I know that when you’re at baptism like your godparents are supposed to kind of be there to help you grow in the faith as well, um, but like I didn’t really see them that much um, well I guess I saw my aunt, but...yeah, she was, we don’t really talk about religion.

**Large groups/communities of adults.** Not all interactions with adults happened with individual adults in the participants' lives. Often participants referred to large groups of people at their parish or in their community who held beliefs or acted in a certain way that influenced the participant. These group influences made up 7.3% ( $N = 20$ ) of total adults mentioned. These groups included: community members, Catholic parish community members, church members at a non-Catholic church, non-Catholic church ministry staff, home country population, and different culture.

Community members were adults within the participant's general geographical and social community. Community members were often referred to when discussing the political or religious beliefs or atmosphere of the participant's town. For example, one participant describes her small Christian town:

I grew up in, like, a small town, small Christian town, and there were different, I guess, denominations of Christianity... most everyone went to church, and so it was something that we were able to talk about and connect with.

Parish community members were mentioned by participants when discussing cultural norms or ideals present in the zeitgeist of their parish. For instance, participants would say, "people at my parish believed..." or "my parish was very..." or "people at my parish liked to..." One participant articulated their experience of the community aspect of the parish by stating, "When I go to church and I see everybody celebrating their faith, singing a song, singing a prayer, um, being vulnerable, like kneeling down and, you know, intentionally connecting with God and each other. It's just beautiful."

Often when asked to give specific examples of individual parish members who supported these claims they could not provide specific examples of these behaviors or beliefs:

Um...I don't know if I remember specifically, um...I don't think I remember anything specifically. But it was just kinda like a common held belief at least within my church that [atheists] were like bad people [laughs] without any moral grounds or anything.

Church members at non-Catholic churches were groups of adults who were members of a nondenominational Christian church the participant attended.

For example, one participant stated:

I really just needed to be embraced by a community and that's what I felt at the nondenominational church...after going for a couple of like services, my mom and I were invited to go to like a Bible study with these women...

Non-Catholic church ministry staff were adults employed by or who volunteered for a non-Catholic church's ministry staff. For example, one participant stated: "Um in middle school...I started going to, um, like, youth group... at the Methodist church... with some of my friends."

Many participants spent time in other countries as children or adults. Some participants had studied abroad, traveled out of the country for a family vacations or because their parent moved for work. Other participants were born in another country and then immigrated with their family to the United States. Regardless of when or why a participant had spent time outside the United States, they pointed to those experiences and people they encountered as influential in their narratives. Like community members and parish community members, the use of home country population and different culture described adults and

interactions the participant had used to make summary conclusions about a culture or nationality of people because of their experience within the country.

Home country population referred to conclusions the participant had made about the cultural norms or ideals present in the zeitgeist of the participant's country of origin presented in the interview as generally held beliefs of most people from that country they encountered. One participant described growing up in a "very Catholic country":

I grew up in...a very Catholic country. Um, pretty much everybody is a Catholic. Um, so everywhere I went, people will make reference to the Catholic Church... growing up, Cath- being Catholic was just being normal...

Similarly, "different culture" referred to cultural norms or ideals present in the zeitgeist of a country the participant visited for some length of time presented in the interview as general held beliefs of most people from that country they encountered. One participant described her time in India:

I went and I studied abroad in India this past winter, and just going to a non-Christian country...the...it kind of opened up, and there was a lot more tolerance and a lot more, um, welcoming that I didn't really feel in the Catholic Church.

## **Research Question 2: Characteristics of Identified Adults**

Influential adults were described not only by their "adult type" but also by their religious identity and personality descriptions. In this section, the theme of religious identity as well as positive and negative characteristic of influential adults provided by participants will be explored. When discussing the adults that participants interacted with, in relation to their religious identity, participants used descriptors that were positive or negative in nature. Many adults were described using both positive as well as negative descriptors. Personality Characteristic themes provided by participants can be found in Table 5.

*Table 5. Characteristics of adults provided by participants during their narratives*

Positive Characteristics	Negative Characteristics
Intelligence	Lack of Knowledge
Logical	
Smart	
Engaging Personality	Unengaging Personality
Easy to understand	Hard to understand
Funny	Awkward
Vibrant	Boring
Inspiring	Creepy/Scary
Patient	Negative
	Pushy/Aggressive (with their ideas)
Approachable	Unapproachable
Caring/Loving	Strict
Non-judgmental/Respectful	Cold/Closed off
Relatable	Disapproving/Judgmental
	Black and white
	Unrelatable
Authentic	Disingenuous
Openly-flawed/Imperfect	Hypocritical
Vulnerable	Holier than thou

**Religious identity.** The majority of adults mentioned (75%,  $N = 208$ ) were Catholic, 9% ( $N = 24$ ) were not Catholic, and 16% ( $N = 43$ ) had never discussed their religious identity with the participant.

*Table 6. Adult religious identities grouped by adult type*

	Family	Parish	School	Retreat leader	Other Adults	Groups	Total
Atheist	1	0	1	0	1	0	3
Baptist	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Buddhist	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
Catholic	67	78	29	9	11	14	208
Christian	1	0	5	0	1	3	10
Jewish	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lutheran	1	0	2	0	1	0	4
Methodist	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Muslim	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Protestant	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Unknown	2	1	32	4	2	2	43
Total	75	79	70	13	18	20	275

Non-Catholic adults identified as, or the participant believed identified as: Atheist, Baptist, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist, Muslim, and Protestant. A summary of adults' religious identities by adult type can be found in Table 6.

**Positive characteristics of adults.** The adult characteristics participants felt positively inclined them toward a Catholic religious identity fell into four thematic categories: 1) intelligence, 2) engaging personality, 3) approachable, and 4) genuine. Positive characteristic main themes as well as each subtheme can be found summarized in Table 6.

*Intelligence.* Participants valued and were drawn to adults who they saw as intelligent in a general sense as well as specifically knowledgeable about religion. Adults who were able to show participants an intellectual side of themselves and present religious topics in an intelligent manner were likely to be viewed favorably by the participant in their care. Intelligence manifested in two subthemes: 1) logical and 2) smart.

*Logical.* The subtheme logical was used to describe an adult who the participant felt used logical conclusions and/or hard facts to make their arguments (either about religion or another topic such as math). One participant noted:

I've always been like really into numbers and science and everything like... that always clashed [with religion]. And .....um, so, like, she was always able to explain that and give me the logic behind everything... This is why and this is how we do it, and um, the meaning behind it and like, gave it... which was okay with me, because, I am like an emotional person but I'm also very logical so it kind of appealed to both sides. So it made me like, want to like do what I had to in the Catholic Church because um... like – it was gonna help me go to heaven and that was like everyone's goal, right? – Participant talking about his Catechism teacher

*Smart.* The subtheme smart was used to describe an adult who the participant felt was knowledgeable about the world as well as about religious matters. Smart was usually tied to some form of institutional backing such as a campus minister being smart because they had a degree in theology or a priest being knowledgeable about Catholicism because he had gone to seminary. For example, one participant stated:

Mostly, I would say, um, my current supervisor...um, and, yeah, so, again, like in our meetings we'll have conversations... so that's been a good space in which to, to ask questions, and she's super knowledgeable, like, she's very intelligent and she has a degree in theology, and so being able to ask questions, and she encourages it. – Participant talking about a Catholic campus ministry staff member

*Engaging Personality.* Participants also viewed adults favorably whom they felt had characteristics indicative of an engaging personality. These characteristics made the adult easy and enjoyable to interact with both in religious and secular settings. These characteristics include being 1) easy to understand, 2) funny, 3) vibrant, 4) inspiring, and 5) patient.

*Easy to understand.* Easy to understand was used to describe adults the participant did not have trouble relating to and were able to articulate and communicate their thoughts without difficulty or confusion. This was seen as particularly influential when, like in the example below, an adult's ability to articulate a concept made a difficult or confusing concept understandable when the participant had been struggling:

The Sunday school teacher... she was just so like... easy to understand and like ... she was just a really great teacher...she was always able to explain something to me in a better way if you didn't understand... and I remember like, thinking like she's the ideal Catholic. This is who I wanna be if I was gonna continue to be Catholic.



Adults were also described as easy to understand when their explanations related to pop culture or examples appropriate to the age of the youth with whom they were interacting. Putting a concept in the terminology of the participant was much appreciated instead of speaking over their heads or down to them. For example, one participant described her parish's deacon's homilies: "He was great, his homilies were like direct, I understood them, he like put Superman references in them at youth Mass, and so it was great. I felt like I could relate to him."

Easy to understand was juxtaposed with adults who were hard to understand (discussed below under disengaging personality) because of thick accents or a language barrier. So inversely, participants, like the participant below describing her parish deacon, were drawn to adults with whom they could easily communicate within their own language:

[He was] very like, again it was like English, so I was like super excited about being able to go to English mass, um, and so that was a, yeah, he was great, his homilies were like direct, I understood them.

*Funny.* Funny adults also gained favor with Catholic-raised youth.

Participants describe adults as funny when they made a lot of jokes and used humor to bond with the participant and/or teach the participant. Bringing humor into their teaching process helped show another side of the adult that allowed participants to relax and feel comfortable around the adult because they were not too serious. For example, one participant stated they appreciated their priest's unexpected sense of humor:

Um, and yeah he was um, he was pretty cool. I think he was, what was really interesting about him was like, he wasn't conservative like a lot of the Catholics I had met um, he was very open about things and he also had a really good sense of humor as well, um he was really funny.

*Vibrant.* The characteristic of vibrant was used to describe adults who had an upbeat energy. Their passion for their work and engaging with youth or talking about Catholicism was almost infectious and endeared these adults to Catholic-raised youth making them want to pay attention to them and their ideas. One example of a vibrant adult was provided by a participant describing his youth minister:

Our youth, uh, minister...she just had this, um... energy, I guess, that brought people in and made everyone feel comfortable talking about faith, um, having fun while doing it, um, which I think is important, 'cause there's a, sometimes an image of, like, strict, like, "we have to be Catholic and, like, uh, follow these rules," but we had so much fun and talked about faith and got to, like, connect with our Catholic identities.

*Inspiring.* Inspiring was used to describe adults who have done exciting or impressive things with their religion and life. Participant looked to these adults as role models or ideals of the Church. One example of inspiring adults was a missionary nun who worked with the poor in another country that the participant saw as an ideal Catholic and wished to be like her:

She was like talking to us about her experience. And I can't remember what country she had been in during that time. Um, but it really struck me that you could go and help people in such a like overt and like physical fashion of being within that space. Um, and being with people who are deemed to have like less fortunate and marginalized and what not, um, I was not using "marginalized" as a 5-6 year old. Um, but so I thought that was just really powerful the fact, like 'cause I knew that I wanted to help people in whatever capacity since I was a kid. Um, I wanted to be working with people, and so I didn't know how to express that within words, but like when I saw her I was like wow...I would really like to do something along those lines in the future.

However inspiring was not confined to larger than life role models but also used to describe adults within participants' communities. One participant described her catechism teacher as someone she wanted to be like:

And then when I got confirmed, um, my teacher was like, really.... she was really like calm about everything. And... I remember thinking like, “wow this is who I want to be – become like – walk towards to become a better Catholic.”

*Patient.* The characteristic patient was also valued among participants.

Patient was used to describe adults who let the participant figure things out in their own time without rushing them or who was willing to answer question after questions after questions about religion without become impatient. Participants who did not feel rushed or expected to know everything engaged more readily with the adults who created this safe environment for them. One participant described his parents as being particularly patient with him. They showed patience when he was coming to them with questions but also showed a different kind of patience later on in life as they gave him space to learn on his own without jumping in to tell him what to do:

It was a huge role, um, they were the ones that introduced me to the faith, to my faith, took me to Church at a young age, explain the small things that I didn't know what they meant, like why does everybody pray at the same time? Why's everybody drinking wine, especially people that are not 21, you know? Um, small things like that, and they of course with love and patience they would explain everything to me, um, but they also as they got older, let me explore, allowed me to explore my faith on my own, and, um, but also were by my side... in case I had more questions, or I needed, if I needed guidance.

*Approachable.* Participants engaged more with and appreciated adults who had personality or behavioral characteristics that could be described as approachable. These were adults that youth and young adults felt they could go to without judgment and be treated lovingly and respectfully. These were also adults the participants felt they could relate to, who understood them.

Approachable adults were adults that participants felt would be easy to or open to being approached for conversation, questions, or companionship. Approachable

consisted of three subthemes: 1) caring/loving, 2) non-judgmental/respectful, and 3) relatable.

*Caring/Loving.* The characteristic caring/loving was used to describe an adult who made the participant feel appreciated, loved, and seen when they were around the adult. These adults took the time to make sure the participant knew the adult saw them and affirmed them. This often took the form of verbal praise but also manifested in a smile or a generally welcoming and inclusive persona.

For example, one participant stated about their professor who was also a priest:

And...he was, has just such amazing energy and just immediately when you walk into the room with him, he's just smiling and just...once you find out a lot of the hardships and the atrocities that he's witnessed, it just makes that even more compelling, that he's always able to exude such love to every single person that he meets.

*Non-judgmental/respectful.* Adults who were non-judgmental/respectful were greatly appreciated by participants. Non-judgmental/respectful was used to describe an adult who was willing to accept the participant the way they were, quirks and all. At a time in the participants' lives where they are changing and exploring who they were and what it meant to live in the world, participants needed the security a non-judgmental adult could offer. One participant, who described himself as "a weird kid" really appreciated being able to be himself at a religious sleep away camp without judgment from his camp counselors:

Um, especially at [religious sleep away camp]...My- the counselors let you be who you wanted to be. So I was a weird kid- and I could be weird, people liked that and they were fun. I'm like, "Why am I such a weirdo?" Um, but no one cared! Or maybe they did, but they were still supportive and happy about it.

Participants discussed how they needed to know there were adults out there who would still like them even if they ended up deciding to not remain

Catholic. Participants valued adults who showed they would still love and support them without expecting them to change their beliefs or behaviors to gain acceptance. One way a participant could determine how an adult would react to them was how they reacted to others in similar situations. For example, one participant described watching her Catechism teacher react to and accept her own daughter distancing herself from the Catholic Church:

The person I remember the most is...was the person that prepared you for Confirmation, and I really liked her. Um, they were just other kid's moms leading the classes, so yeah. Yeah, I liked her a lot...And she was, I know that her daughter isn't really religious anymore, and I think she wasn't really in CCD either, and she just seemed very respectful of anyone's beliefs, so I liked that. I think if she, um, were kind of strict about you believing whatever certain rules then I maybe wouldn't have liked her as much.

*Relatable.* Participants also appreciated and were drawn to adults and groups of adults with whom they shared similar qualities. This theme of being relatable was used to describe an adult who the participant felt had similarities to them that made them worth listening to because of this common ground. Similarities that made adults relatable varied. These could be a demographics similarity (gender, age, and sexuality) a shared interest or occupation (music or being ex-military) or a personality type (laid back, shatter brained). For example, one participant described his shared interest in music and a similar personality type with his choir director, which made her relatable to him:

Like, the energy she gives. The way she expresses herself is something I already find attractive in people in general, and then I find it in a person who also takes their faith very seriously, and who takes something I like, music, very seriously, and you have this amalgamation of a lot of things that I like in one person. It's like, whoa. So it's very easy to listen to what she tries to give to the choir and tries to give me in that sense...It's just it's- it resembles a lot of my own... I like that 'cause like, it's true, it's like how I also am.

*Authentic.* The theme authentic was used to describe adults whom participants felt did not put on airs or put of a façade. Instead these adults projected a persona of sincerity that allowed the participant to feel they were interacting with and seeing the real person; imperfections and all. Adult who fit under the authentic theme presented with one or more of the two authentic subthemes: 1) openly-flawed/imperfect and 2) vulnerable.

*Openly flawed/imperfect.* Participants seemed drawn to adults who were willing to be openly imperfect or flawed in front of their students. These adults showed participants in their care that they were flawed as humans and flawed as Catholics. They did not try to pretend like they had everything about life or their religious life figured out. Yet even amid their imperfection they were seeking God and pointing others toward God. These adults would likely describe themselves as trying their best but be the first to admit they do not know all the answers. One example of an openly imperfect or flawed adult was a Catechism teacher who disclosed she was a recovering alcoholic:

There was one Sunday school teacher, I loved her. She's so just like kind of out there, um, and she was great because she was a, like a recovering alcoholic and she's like telling us all of these crazy stories about her life and she tells us, you know, she, um, was, she was hitting a point in her life where she was recovering and, you know, she was praying to Saint Jude, the Saint of lost causes, because she identified with that [laughs], and she was like praying for like God to send something good into her life, then she walks into an AA meeting and meets her husband... I think that's what was so beautiful about it to me, is that it wasn't this archaic, prescribed narrative of what Catholicism should be; I started seeing it as a lived experience that varied from person to person.

*Vulnerable.* Adults who allowed participants to see a vulnerable side of themselves were described as an adult who was willing to be seen while they were suffering or in the messiness of their own lives. They are willing to show that

there is sadness or vulnerability in their life. One example of an adult being vulnerable was a mother who allowed her daughter to see her mourning the death of her parents (the participant's grandparents). Both mother and daughter were hit hard by the sudden loss of these loved ones. By disclosing to her daughter that she was having a hard time engaging with her God through Mass (just as the daughter was), the mother was able to open a dialogue on how they could move forward together instead of the daughter hiding her anxiety of returning to Mass:

I think it was during that week when I went home, my mom asked me- of course she asked me in the car, if like there was a certain reason why I wouldn't go to Mass, and then like, I got all emotional about it and I explained to her, and then she told me she's feeling the exact same way, that she could not bring herself to go to Mass [since her father had died]...but that she would try to like, work her way up to that point...and that we could try that together.

**Negative Characteristics.** Descriptor characteristics participants associated with negative interactions that discouraged them from future interactions with an adult and left them less inclined to view Catholicism positively, fell into 4 categories: 1) lack of knowledge, 2) unengaging personality, 3) unapproachable, and 4) disingenuous. Negative characteristic main themes as well as each subtheme can be found summarized in Table 3.

***Lack of knowledge.*** The characteristic "lack of knowledge" was used to describe adults that the participant did not feel had the credentials or knowledge to be in a teaching or authority position regarding the Catholic Church. As one participant mentioned, if a middle school or high school student knew more about a religious topic than their teacher, why should they be listening to the teacher as an authority on Catholicism?

I remember... my teacher, I – she didn't know, like... I would like.... I knew a lot, for some reason I knew a lot about all of the parables and stuff, and um, I was so into that. And... um.. she didn't, she would always get things wrong. And I always felt like I had to correct her – and so then...I'm like, okay like if I have to correct you like how are you teaching me how to be a better Catholic?

However, this theme was not only used when describing teachers. A lack of knowledge also caused a disconnect for participants even when the person was not a teacher but simply a Catholic adult. Through one participant's logic, if an adult in the parish community called themselves Catholic, they should have accurate knowledge about their religious tradition:

And that is something that, even now I still don't like.. seeing anybody speak about religion and just saying things without knowing what they're saying, especially when a Catholic is saying something that isn't true about their faith, but they don't know it because they haven't decided to check up on it, I hate it. I really- I just- It drives me insane when I hear that.

*Unengaging Personality.* Participants also viewed adults unfavorable whom they felt had characteristics indicative of a disengaging personality. These characteristics made the adult difficult or frustrating to interact with both in religious and secular situations. These characteristics including being: 1) hard to understand, 2) awkward, 3) boring, 4) creepy/scary, 5) negative, or 6) pushy/aggressive with their ideas.

*Hard to understand.* Participants disliked engaging with adults they described as “hard to understand.” The theme hard to understand was used to describe an adult with whom the participant had a hard time communicating. One type of communication disconnect was when the adult was bad at speaking to the participant's age group. Some examples provided were of adults speaking over their heads or using references not applicable or relatable for the age range. In the example below, the participant discusses his dislike for his parish appointed



confirmation sponsor who he did not feel was able to “get on his level” or relate to him on the energy level he wanted:

Um...and like I was like so weirdly turned off by that guy. I was like first of all you're way too happy. Like...have a rainy day or something cuz I was, again, you know really struggling with my own depression, um, and kind of figuring out my own mental health and things like that, so I was just looking at him, I was like you're EXHAUSTING me right now with just aw- just you're ha- ugh shut up. [Laughs] um, uh and it wasn't like it- he was like “God's really great!” like that kind of like exhausting happiness, he was just an exhausting person to me.

Adults were also hard to understand when there was a language barrier.

Participants from Latinx or Polish backgrounds voiced frustration when they were at an English Mass but had not mastered the language yet or at a Non-English Mass and had to focus too hard to understand the person speaking. For example, one participant stated the following about a parish ministry staff member:

If we had English, if we went to English Mass, then all the kids would be gathered, and we'd be taken out by this very, like old and like, had beautiful grey hair, and just like this woman who would always play the guitar as we were coming out, um, and the song was like, um “I've got the soul-” or like “Sun, sun, sun, sun deep in my heart” and so we would walk out. Um, but I didn't understand English very well, and so I really didn't know what was going on half of the time.

Language barrier may also get in the way for an adult coming into a community without sufficient language skills to have in-depth conversations with the participant such as giving advice in the confessional:

Oh, uhm, [my first confession] was so nerve racking. [laughs.] I'm a little bit claustrophobic so it was a tiny room, a dark room, and I remember the teachers saying like... Remember to pay attention, after your confession because he's going to tell you how many prayers to do and what kind... I remember at the end, he- he said that, he doesn't like, he's Polish, but his English was like bad, and his Spanish was worse. [laughs.] So when he was talking to us in Spanish, so like I didn't even hear what he said. It was kind of like, really fast and jumbled with a heavily accented... so I didn't even hear what he told me to do... I remember getting out, and I'm just like, I guess I'll just do ten of every prayer. I'm sure that'll do it. [laughs.]

As in the example above, adults who had a thick accent may be hard to understand and depending on the age and extroversion of the participant they may not be willing to ask the adult to repeat themselves or work through the communication barrier, so they instead disengage to go figure it out on their own.

*Awkward.* The characteristic awkward was used to describe an adult who did not know how to act around people and specifically youth. The adult may not even be aware of how they make others feel around them. An adult who acted awkwardly around youth could be awkward because of talking too much or not talking enough. For example, one participant discussed a group of youth group leaders who were awkward because they over-shared:

And then you have the people in the youth group the adults, it's just-, you know when you have uncomfortable- people who make people uncomfortable but they're not aware of how they make people uncomfortable, and they're not bad people, but they make people uncomfortable? Because of how...up front they are about things they shouldn't be up front about, and how- they just, they just make you uncomfortable, and they're not aware of it, and then they expect you to be super happy about it and it's just like, no, and it just creates more annoyances.

Inversely, another participant described an awkward experience with a priest in the confessional where the adult did not know what to say:

Um, I'd say one thing that still bothered me from that was I think I said something during one of my Confessions that was like...I don't know what kind of sexuality I am...is this ok? And so I mentioned that, you know what does this mean? Is this ok? Um, I don't think the person who was on the other side was okay with that...they didn't talk for like a minute or two, I think they were probably thinking of something to say. Um, or maybe a punishment or something. Um, so that I kept to myself for a few years.

Both instances lead to the participant wanting to disengage from that adult.

In the second example, the participant hides a part of himself from his community because of the awkward behavior of an adult in whom he confided.

*Boring.* Participants described adults as boring when they did not view them as exciting or interesting. In a culture in which more and more demands are being put on the time of high school and college students, being at a Catechism class or youth group event that did not engage or hold their attention was a hard sell for participants in the study. As one participant described, if the adult was not telling them anything new in Catechism class or if an event was not interesting, then they did not want to be there.

Well, [Sunday school classes] were kind of a drag. I just ha- I had to go every Sunday. It's one of those Catholic things when you grow up Catholic and you have to do it. You know, like I was trust me I would have been a-okay with or without it, you know, all- I mean, it's all symbolism. [The teachers] were boring. Everything [about the teachers was boring]. I kinda already knew everything that they were going to say.

A similar feeling was discussed regarding attending Mass. In the example below, the participant describes observing the faces of demeanor of their parish community while at Mass. The community is described as “in a bad mood.” No one was smiling or seemed happy to be at Mass and engaging in the liturgy. One participant reflected on why she was made to attend Mass when everyone at Mass was unhappy:

Um...I don't know. I think—well, I was like a kid so I thought it was really boring. Um...I don't know. Nobody ever seemed happy to be there. Which, like, I didn't want to go somewhere where everybody was just like in a bad mood and like—I don't know, it felt like depressing walking in there because everybo- like, nobody ever smiled. Um, at least at my church, like nobody seemed happy to be there. Um, and I feel like that made me not want to be there so I would put up a fight to not go. [laughs ]

*Creepy/Scary.* Participants also struggled to bond with adults they described as creepy/scary. Creepy and scary were used to describe adults or

groups of adults the participant felt uncomfortable and possibly unsafe around.

For example, one participant described her dad:

I was just praying that I could have a better... relationship with my dad 'cause he just frustrated me so much... goodness gracious that man has anger issues and like he'd just- it seems like he did not even care about like what he did or like who he would hurt in the process. Although, he...sometimes he says things to my mom... but like he- he never like ever hurts her or anything, ... as for the rest of us though it seemed like he did not care about our feelings or anything, and he would just let his anger like take over him.

However, a participant did not need to fear for their own physical or emotional safety to feel uncomfortable with an adult or group of adults. In the example below, a participant describes attending Mass at her grandmother's church after a long absence. The participant described finding the communal responses during Mass from the congregation "culty" instead of welcoming and familiar.

I remember...my boyfriend joking, well after the mass that like, it was so *culty*... and I was like, um ya I agree [laughs], and that's how I felt...just everyone kind of doing everything mindlessly and going through the motions. Like, no one seems passionate...I don't know, just like, the mindlessness behind it, I guess. Um...and that's just kind of a turn-off for me, I think.

The over-sexualization of teenage girls and the emphasis on girls remaining pure, especially by male teachers, was also extremely off putting and described as creepy. If an adult authority figure could not be trusted not to go into "tirades" degrading women, how could they become a trusted source of support? For example, one participant stated the following about her high school theology teacher:

I know specifically my freshmen year theology teacher was like, a little bit crazy, um, and was kind of abrasive with some of my...fellow students and...at one point like went on this tirade about how like, teenage girls are so like, morally corrupt and all this stuff and how it's just like that is not... This is the authority I

have of in front of me on what being a Catholic means, and I hate everything that was coming out of his mouth and so that was really frustrating for me.

*Negative.* Participants were less likely to engage with and appreciate adults they viewed as negative. Negative was used to describe an adult the participant felt had an especially unpleasant demeanor or outlook on life or humanity. These adults were also described as never being in a good mood or happy to see them. For example, one participant described her catechism teacher:

She just looked miserable. She was like the head person too. She was awful. She just didn't want to be there. She was like...I don't know... she was just always like kinda, like, mean and like snappy to everybody and...like you could just tell like she just was not happy doing what she was doing and I feel like she just did it 'cause she felt like she had to.

Another example of a negative adult provided by a participant was of being forced to attend Sunday school classes where they felt each week they were being taught “one more reason they were going to hell.” If an adult is going to yell at them or try and scare them into submission with threats of Hell, then the participant was not going to want to associate with that adult or what that adult represented: the Catholic Church.

They- they were never in a good mood so I always felt like unwelcomed, and yeah... 'cause like every week I would like learn a new reason why I was going to hell. And, like, like, [the Catechism teacher] is not in a good mood, yelling at you already, and scaring you with sins—I feel like that contributed, um, to it.

*Pushy/Aggressive (with their ideas).* Pushy/Aggressive was also a negative theme commonly brought up by participants. Pushy/Aggressive was used to describe an adult that the participant felt overly pressured by to accept or take on their (usually religious/political) ideals as their own. In the example below, a participant, while on a church trip was discussing abortion with a fellow group member when she was overheard by a priest leader of the group:

Um, however I think at some point he overheard a conversation that I was having with th- with like another person...and so he had like pulled me aside because I think we were talking about abortion. Uh, and he was like, “you know, like, that’s not a Catholic thing to say” and what not. And so I think, again, I like pushed back a lot and I was just like you know, it’s not your place to go and tell me what I can and cannot believe. Um, I’m willing to talk to you about why I believe in this thing, but I dislike the fact that you’re trying to convince me otherwise right now. Um, I don’t think you need to convince me- I think you need to tell me about what your point-of-view is, and I can understand then where you’re coming from.

Instead of, as the participant points out, the priest telling her about his point of view, so she could understand his logic, he confrontationally calls her beliefs uncatholic. The participant felt the priest missed an important learning opportunity to dialogue with her instead of labeling her behavior and, in her view, her religious identity as “not Catholic.” The way he approached the conversation made any change in her views a non-starter.

***Unapproachable.*** Participants also discussed what characteristics made an adult unapproachable. Unapproachable was used to describe an adult the participant did not feel comfortable approaching to discuss religion or ask questions. The conclusion of whether an adult was approachable or not could be made because of a previous interaction with the adult or a general demeanor the participant has picked up on that suggested conversation outside what is expected would be unwelcome and met hostilely. Unapproachability consisted of five subthemes: 1) strict, 2) cold/closed off, 3) disapproving/judgmental, 4) black and white, and 6) unrelatable.

***Strict.*** The theme strict was used to describe an adult the participant felt held very specific behavior expectations of them when it came to acceptable behavior and beliefs. These confining expectations often led to conflict between

the participant and the adult. In the example below, a participant discusses butting heads with her boyfriend's mother, who was also her Sunday school teacher. The woman had very strict rules for how her son's girlfriend should and should not act:

My Sunday school teacher whose son I dated, she was very just like, did not, she was like very by the rules... like she wouldn't let [my boyfriend and me] sit together at church, which I was like "this is absurd", and she was like "no, in church it's about you and God only" and I'm like "Oh my God, Okay". Um, and so it was people like her that were kind of like higher up in the Church and I was like: "Mmm I don't like all of these rules" and to me also like as a teenager you just don't like rules in general, and so I was very just turned off by that.

As the participant mentions, as a teenager she was naturally prone to rebel against rules. By leading with the rules in their relationship, the adult cut off her ability to mentor or bond with the participant.

*Cold/Closed off.* Adults were described as cold/closed off when the participant felt the adult was not open to forming an emotional relationship with them or being approached to answer questions. This may be due to past conflict or a conclusion drawn on the adult's general behavior. These adults often came across as not wanting to be interacting with the participant or young people. Adults who also gave off the impression they did not want to be teaching and were just there because they had to be, were also described as cold/closed off. Without a genuine desire to be working with these teens, participants did not feel able to approach or bond with these adults. For example, one participant stated the following about a nun at her school:

I think I did have a class with one nun and I didn't really like it...it felt... maybe just the fact that she was a nun kind of scared the shit out of me. 'Cause like, they're so old like, at least the ones at my high school and like, that was just so scary 'cause obviously they're quite traditional... like they usually would just come off as cold and...not too happy to be teaching us.

*Disapproving/Judgmental.* Disapproving/Judgmental was used to describe an adult the participant felt did not approve of them or a specific group of people or behavior. In the example below, a participant discusses their grandmother's disapproval of the participant's parents' interracial marriage. The conflict between the grandmother and the participant's mother colored the participant's views on religion, especially religious ideas voiced by her grandmother:

And I guess my grandma too. My grandma's very strict Catholic Filipino. Um, she actually—my dad's white, um, so she didn't even like that my mom, a Filipino woman, married a white man. So she's very, very old school, traditional, um, especially with religion. Um, she would always talk about it and her room is like a shrine of crosses and beads and pictures of the pope. [laughs] So she was another really big figure, um, that influenced, um, I guess my perspective on religion in my life.

Disapproving/Judgmental was not confined to one-on-one relationships but was also described within a parish community. In the example below, the participant discusses not feeling as accepted and welcomed at the parish they were attending compared to the parish they attended before moving as they had at their last church. This lack of welcome was attributed to the parish's overarching preoccupation with looks, status, and wealth. Since the participant's family did not have those things and her mom was extremely overweight because of her battle with depression, this air of judgment that permeated the parish did not encourage her to stay engaged.

[My parish] um for fifth through eighth grade... just kind of felt like they- like just judgey... we did try to go I think it just- I don't know, something just didn't really click, and it felt... it felt like people were kind of judgey and just not as welcoming as people were at [our last parish]... a lot of families came from a lot of money, and like the moms are ya know, hot and skinny and like, that's a very-like large stereotype. But that's honestly like, what it was. Like, it was just... like the pretty moms and like, my mom wasn't really one of those. She's like, very overweight...um...and, which she isn't now, she's lost like half of her body



weight it's insane, she's lost like 150 pounds... I think it just had to do with the types of families that went to the parish, if that makes sense.

*Black and White.* Participants did not take kindly to adults they saw as having a black and white worldview. Black and white was used to describe an adult who had clear (often binary) moral absolutes of what they considered as good and bad in the world. These adults often saw their religion as good and right and then everything/everyone else as bad or wrong. These adults did not have room in their world view for gray areas or moral ambiguity (i.e. it was hard to see that a person having premarital sex or who was LGBTQA could still be a good moral person). For example, one participant described his grandmother:

Yeah, I guess it was also kind of a similar thing where its like this is the only way, there is no other way, um, this is the only thing you can believe. Anything else is bad. Um, and she kind of has that perspective with a lot of different things, so, even if its just like a different country, like "Oh, this country's bad because of they had conflicts with Philippines" or whatever... Um, yeah so I would just it was, um, kind of like you have to believe in this, there's no other option, it's the only [sighs] only path for morality, righteousness, um, if you don't follow it you're like a shame to the family.

*Unrelatable.* Similar to relatable (discussed above under engaging personality), participants found they did not bond with adults to whom they could not relate. Unrelatable was used to describe an adult with whom the participant was unable to find common ground. This could have been because of age, religious views, political views or, as in the example below regarding a participant and his father, simply because of a lack of commonality:

Um, my father and I were strangely not very close. Um, like I just kinda remember kinda looking at him and just never having this like connection of recognizing like, you are my father. It was more so this like looking at like oh you are my father. Like this random man...like you know what I mean? Like this very kind of like out of body experience kind of just looking at him and just realizing again that he is actually my dad. Um... but yeah, no he never talked

about faith or anything like that. Um, I don't think our – we could ever, I mean we could barely even carry on a conversation for the most part. Um, so yeah.

*Disingenuous.* Participants had a low tolerance for adults they felt were acting disingenuous either in their interactions with the participant or where the participant could see them. Two disingenuous subthemes emerged: 1) hypocritical and 2) “holier than thou”.

*Hypocritical.* Hypocritical was used to describe an adult the participant felt behaved in a way counter to the beliefs they proclaimed to follow. In other words, the adult may be claiming to be a good Catholic/Christian, but the participant found them to be mean or the adult may be known for gossiping or another “non-Christian” behaviors. In these cases, the adult lost authority in the eyes of the participant as they had a hard time taking what was coming out of their mouths seriously when their behavior told another story. For example, one participant described people at his parish gossiping after Mass:

And also, the fact that a lot of them would like get together after the Mass service and just really gossip about one another, you know, some like conversations you overhear when you stay for coffee later. I think that really discouraged me from like going to Mass.

*“Holier than thou”.* Adults who acted “holier than thou” were those who the participant felt thought they were better than the participant or someone else because of their religious beliefs or actions. In the first example below, a participant discusses their mother making fun of and looking down on her spouse because he had had a less than perfect track record with attending Mass because of his struggle with alcoholism, whereas she, not faced with the same barrier, had not missed a week of Mass.

I'd heard my mom mention before...because she has been consistently going to church every single week since she was a kid, and she like never missed a week. Um, and my dad had been an alcoholic for a few years. And so, he just didn't go to church very often, because he was probably hung over or drunk. And so, she would throw that in his face sometimes, that like he lost time with God because he was an alcoholic.

A perception of being “holier than thou” did not necessarily need to be tied to a singular behavior. One participant discussed “a certain type of person” in their hometown parish who put on airs at Mass and looked down at others at the parish for maybe not dressing as nicely or not being in the in-crowd within the parish community. The participant saw this as akin to bullying, for which they had little tolerance:

Um [short pause] I can't think of like a specific person but I can tell you there was like definitely a certain type of person in my hometown that goes to like Mass and is like I'm too good for you, and like rolls up in like a nice little hat and just feels as though they are above it, and definitely treat church as a clique, and that's not my jam because I was bullied [laughs] in like my entire upbringing and so again that concept of like someone coming in feeling super superior is something that like turns me away from that, turns me off to it.

### **Characteristic Themes Categorized by Adult Type**

While it is important to understand that positive and negative characteristics exist in these adult-youth dynamics with Catholic-raised youth, the picture is incomplete without addressing whose personality and characteristics are being described. In Table 7, characteristic themes are broken down by adult type. The majority of positive characteristics were evenly spread out across the three main adult type groups (*family, parish, and school*). When discussing negative characteristics, most stories arose when discussing adults from the participant's *family and parish*.

*Table 7. Characteristic themes categorized by adult type*

	Family	Parish	School	Rel Event	Group	Other
<b>Positive Characteristics</b>						
Intelligence	6	4	5	1	0	0
Engaging Personality	8	26	18	3	2	4
Approachable	16	30	19	3	3	4
Authentic	5	6	3	1	1	1
<b>Negative Characteristics</b>						
Lack of Knowledge	2	3	3	0	0	0
Unengaging Personality	25	21	8	1	4	2
Unapproachable	23	19	8	0	6	3
Disingenuous	6	5	2	0	4	0

### **Research Question 3: Behaviors of Identified Adults**

In addition to describing the characteristics of influential adults, participants also discussed adult behaviors they believed influenced their religious identity development (either positively or negatively). In this section, these positive and negative behaviors provided by participants will be explored. When discussing the adults participants interacted with in relation to their religion, participants discussed how these adults influenced their religious identity and if, for them, this behavior was either a positive or negative influence. Every participant described at least one positive and one negative adult behavior. It was also possible for one adult to display both a positive as well as a negative behavior.

**Positive behaviors.** Behaviors participants felt positively influenced their religious identity fell into six thematic categories: 1) provided unconditional support, 2) facilitated/had discussions about religion, 3) taught about the Catholic religion, 4) modeled a Catholic lifestyle, 5) respected other religions, and 6)

connected youth to Catholic experiences/people. Positive behaviors main themes as well as subthemes can be found summarized in Table 7.

*Table 8. Adult behaviors provided by participants during their narratives*

Positive Behavior	Negative Behavior
Provided unconditional support Actively supported participant’s religious identity Participant knew their approval was not contingent on their religious identity	Provided conditional support Actively did not support participant’s religious identity Participant hid current religious identity from adult
Facilitated/Had discussions about religion Encouraged participant to speak about religion Had intelligent conversations Shared own experiences	Lacked/Discouraged religious conversations Does not discuss religion Negative reaction to doubt or questions “Because I said so”
Taught about the Catholic religion Taught moral/social teachings Taught facts/rationale/history Taught how to pray Read the Bible with them Taught science and religion as compatible	Taught incorrect religious information Talked badly about the Church or its beliefs Taught science and religion as opposites Taught pray as a fix-all
Modeled a Catholic lifestyle Owned or used religious materials Put religion into action Participated at their parish Seen being Catholic in daily life	Did not model a Catholic lifestyle Seen as a “Nominal Catholic” Infrequently/Did not attend Mass Did not model Catholic morals Did not pray in front of participant
Respected other religions Exposed to other religions Willing to have multicultural or interreligious conversations	Disrespected other religions Spoke badly about other religions Presented Catholic as good and all else as bad
Connected youth to Catholic people/experiences Connected to Catholic people Connected to Catholic experiences Connected to Catholic items Connected to new ways to look at Catholicism	Negative connections to Catholic activities Excluded participant from activities Forced participant to attend activities

***Provided unconditional support.*** Adults who showed unconditional support made sure the participants in their life knew that they either 1) actively supported the participant's religious identity (whether Catholic or non-Catholic) or made sure the 2) participant knew their approval was not contingent on their religious identity.

*Actively supported participant's religious identity.* Adults, usually referring to parents, actively supported participants through actions as well as words. For example, a Previously-Catholic participant described her dad standing up for her when her mom was trying to force her to go to church. Her dad did not agree with her religious beliefs but went out of his way to make sure she knew he respected her choices by standing with her against her mom:

Like when my mom tries to force me to go to church, [Dad is] always like, like "this is her decision, this is her life, you don't have to do it anymore. And she's not living under our roof and it's not burdening you, calm down." My mom still doesn't take that the right way. Like – that's how he just kinda like, sticks up for me, like "you don't have to if you don't want to..."

Catholic parents of Currently-Catholic participants also actively showed their support of their child. One participant described her parents affirming her choice to be Catholic and telling her they were proud of her in a letter when she was on retreat:

They said [that they were proud of my faith]. Um, specifically when I was, when I got the letters, when I first went on Kairos and the second time when I was a leader on Kairos. Um, which was after my freshman year of college.

*Participant knew their approval was not contingent on their religious identity.* Parents also demonstrated their unconditional support by making sure their child knew their approval and love was not contingent on the religious

identity of the participant. In other words, the parents loved the participant no matter what and simply wanted them to be happy. For example, one participant described seeing her parents respond when her sister told them she was an

Atheist:

[My family] definitely encouraged being uh, Catholic 'cause again, that's what ...they believe in that, but at the same time they're not uh, if we question it, if I were to question it, um I don't think... they would be terribly against it...to give an example, my sister actually...she...become Atheist... but my parents really haven't uh been upset about that...obviously [they] still want what's best for her... but they understand that...right now she just is gonna go a different way and that's-that's okay... I'm glad...even though I agree with them and... the rest of us are still Catholic believers that they're...not gonna be like "oh you have to be Catholic or else" they're-they're open to letting, you know, their children make uh their decisions about their faith. Even if it's not the faith they believe in personally.

One participant discussed how her parents supported her desire to go on school sponsored service immersion trips even though they did not like the idea of going into poor communities to "save people." How she practiced her Catholicism did not match with how they practiced their Catholicism, yet they still supported her and were willing to discuss the areas where they disagreed:

[Going on service trips] has been interesting to talk to my parents about because... there's just been kind of like a miscommunication of, like... what it means to me... [I'm not] going in places to, uh, save people...it's not...charity...Service immersion... they're really based in, like, learning about the community that you go into...you listen to people... you're not always doing what people imagine when they hear "service trip," of, of serving meals... so I think it was harder for my parents to see... why I was [going]. But the support was still there, of, like they see that I'm doing something that I'm passionate about and that excites me, um, and, so there is support there, but I think there is, like, a disconnection, you know, confusion, you know.

***Facilitated or Had Discussions about Religion.*** Participants appreciated the presence of and influence of adults who facilitated religious discussion or were willing to have discussions about religion with the participant. This theme

of religious discussions had three subthemes: 1) encouraged participant to speak about religion, 2) had intelligent conversations, and 3) shared own experiences.

*Encouraged youth to speak about religion.* Adults encouraged participants to speak about religion in many ways. Some adults encouraged participants to talk about religion by asking them about it. For example, one participant discussed his Catechism teacher sitting him down to ask him one-on-one about his religious beliefs:

Um, but I remember the afternoon one was a lot more fun. Um, I had a really nice, engaging teacher. I don't really remember her that much, but um I remember she would always make us question about "what is faith to you?" and that's something that was something- that was kinda cool...

Other adults encouraged this discussion in group settings such as in religion class at school, in Catechism classes, or in youth group. By opening the floor and creating a space for discussions where youth voices were heard and valued, these adults encouraged youth to speak about religion instead of staying silent. For example, one participant described being in a classroom discussing religion as one of the first times her or her classmates had been "given the space to question and talk through" religion:

Um, but I liked that because it was just like an open space, um, and so that was great because I don't feel like any of us had had an open space to discuss religion. Most of us came from very traditional like Catholic backgrounds, with parents who like, similar to mine, just like taught us to pray, this is what you will do. We were never given the space to like question and talk through that and workshop through things, and so the open space I feel like benefitted us.

Other adults modeled the behavior themselves by speaking about God in everyday life. By mentioning God casually and often, these adults showed the participant it was okay to have these types of conversations as well as drew the participant's attention to places where they could see God. For example, one



participant discussed a university staff member who would regularly mentioned God at work:

She's one of those people that is not afraid to name something when, you know, it, like she'll name God, like she'll say "wow, that incredible thing that happened, like that's God's work" and she was the first person that I think like did that in a way that didn't terrify me [laughs].

Another encouraging behavior participants talked about was when an adult did not dominate a religious conversation but instead let the participant have the floor to talk out their ideas. By listening more than they talked, participants were encouraged that their thoughts on religion were valued and worth voicing out loud to an adult. One participant discussed a religious brother who worked at his school/parish who would listens more than he talked:

When I have doubts or questions I'm gonna be hanging down in ministry or go talk to him. Um, and he will do... more listening than talking. Um, and what I needed at the time is I just needed to be heard, and sometimes I would figure it out by just listen to myself, um, and he would give me that space. But he also would guide me when he thought I needed a little guidance.

*Had intelligent conversations.* Participants also appreciated adults who were not only willing to have conversations but also conversed with them in a way that made the participant feel equal or at least not stupid or less than. Adults did this by not dumbing down the content when describing it to the participant. For example, one participant described suddenly feeling like they were being given the adult version of religion instead of "those children's version of the Bible." By presenting the material in a more grownup way, such as relating it to everyday life, this participant did not feel like they were being given an edited version. This fuller picture helped them to put their religion into practice:

Um, and then I was taking confirmation classes which was really cool, I felt like I was starting to learn a lot more about how to apply faith because it had been

this... like very watered-down context, it almost felt like up until then my entire religious education had been like...those children's version of the Bible.

Adults who had intelligent conversations with youth also made sure they knew that it was okay to have doubts and that asking questions or having concerns did not make you a bad person. Furthermore, one participant's mom reassured her it was okay to have doubt and that it was normal to have concerns at her age:

And I've told her before, you know, I'm not sure, you know I don't like some of these things within Catholicism, but I still like, believe in God, and I don't want you to think that I don't. Um, and she was like that's fine. You're literally 20. Like, this is to be expected of like the point in time you are in your life.

*Shared own experiences.* Adults often used sharing their own experiences as a way to start conversations about religion with the participant. Sharing their own experiences may take the form of a story of a religious experience or struggles from the participant's own religious journey.

For example, one participant, who was born blind, discussed how her dad used to tell her the story of how he prayed to the Virgin Mary and how the surgery to fix her eyes worked. She described this as one of her earliest lessons on who and what God was:

So I was born blind and then had a series of different surgeries and my parents didn't know if I would ever be able to see... [So] my dad went to a church in Mexico and there was this thing where you prayed to the Virgin Mary and it's like you go...around the church on your knees and it's like to show a sacrifice and he prayed that I would be able to see and that I would be okay. And so my whole life...that was something that I was constantly told like all of the time... so that was kind of my whole concept of God up until about elementary school.

Another way adults shared their own experience was to tell the non-miraculous stories of their religious journeys. These adults had not witnessed a medical miracle but had struggled and persevered in their relationship with God. For example, one participant described being invited to a Bible study at a

nondenominational church and hearing about the lives of the older female members:

You see this blend of a lot of like imperfect people, really just kind of like taking me in...my mom and I were invited to go to like a Bible study with these women...I was like the youngest person there by at least a decade. Um, and it was really cool to again hear those imperfect stories, to hear these women struggling, um, and to hear like what it looked like to be a woman of God, um, through their eyes.

Another important lesson participants learned through conversations about religion with adults was that no one really has it all figured out. Adults are struggling and striving just like the participants. This acknowledgement that adults do not have everything about religion or life figured out gave participants permission to struggle in their beliefs without being a bad Catholic. For example, one participant described the group of Catechism teachers at her parish:

It was just like, I think the best way to describe it is it was messy, and I loved that. I loved that people were imperfect, because for me, my whole life I had been taught that faith was like a way to achieve like ideal perfection in the image of God, and I was like not having that. Um, these women like were divorced, these women came from like difficult households, they came, they had struggled, they didn't, you know, understand their faith all at once.

***Taught about the Catholic Religion.*** Participants also spoke of how adults who taught them about Catholicism, how to apply religion to daily life, and about the religion's history influenced their religious identity development. The theme of teaching manifested in five subthemes: 1) taught moral/social teachings, 2) taught Catholic facts, rationale, and history 3) taught how to pray, 4) read the Bible with participant, and 5) taught science and religion as compatible.

***Taught moral/social teaching of the Church.*** Adults who connected with participants through a religious context were responsible for teaching them about

the Church's moral and social teachings. This task was accomplished by different adults in different settings depending on the situation.

Some taught in the classroom through reading Church documents. For example, one participant discussed learning about Catholic social teaching regarding how to treat the poor and vulnerable in society through an online class. Her professor had them read *Caritas in Veritate*. Through this class assigned reading, she learned that her morals were a lot closer to what the Church teaches than she had originally believed:

I've also taken a class on catholic social teaching... loved taking that class even though it was online, but I just, I liked reading all of the like, Caritas Veritas, or whatever... especially with like the recent political climate and stuff and like with a lot of people coming out and like saying things...I like thought like kind of went against the Catholic Church with like the way the people treat the poor just like treat other people um, and just reading this catholic social teaching which was like um, like kind of confirming in me like, oh no, we, we care about the poor and like we are looking at all of these systematic issues and we know of them and we're not being silent on them, and as Catholics like we need to act on them and like be good about them, and I was like Church agrees with me. Or rather, I agree with the Church.

Another participant discussed how her youth group leader taught her youth group to put religious teaching into action through forming relationships with a group of men with learning disabilities. Not only did they create community, but they also learned how a Catholic is supposed to treat people on the fringes:

We, had a really close relationship with... a center nearby for... mentally disabled men, um, and some of them were, like, high school-age and they would come and hang out at youth group with us, or, like, we would go there, and, um, so just creating a community where everyone was welcome, and everyone was important and special, um, is really important for high school students, and was really important for me to feel, to feel important and to feel I had a community.

*Taught facts, rationale, and history.* Some participants learned about their childhood religion at Catholic schools through their teachers while others learned

from their Catechism teachers once a week. Participants also spoke of studying and learning about Catholicism from their parents and family.

These participants learned about “Catholic facts” such as what the Church believes about the afterlife, guardian angels, and the lives of the saints, etc. One participant discussed doing her First Holy Communion homework with her aunt where she had to learn the parts of the Mass and about the Eucharist:

I- what’s that you get in second grade? No, Eucharist you get in second grade, right? Yeah. So, I remember I had to study like, for that, and my aunt was also like, a heavy...like...Jesus supporter Christian, Catholic, all that stuff. So, um, she would help me through like, the quizzes and like, the assignments where you’d have to like memorize like, the certain parts of the Mass, and like what it means to like get Communion.

As participants aged, adults started teaching beyond the facts and started delving into the rationale behind the beliefs and actions. Learning the rationale behind their religion helped participants grow deeper and more in touch with their Catholicism. For example, one participant discussed how his choir director taught him not only the “what” and “when” of Mass, but also the “why”:

Um, the director of the choir... he has been definitely influential for me of understanding...the liturgy... coming to [college]... I’ve grown the most in is understanding Mass...why we go to Mass...the different parts...the importance of the Eucharist...the readings...the different rituals...prior to coming to [college]...it was just something that I’m like well that’s what we do, um, and we didn’t really talk about why we believe what we believe and...why we do what we do. And I think that the church choir kind of being the gateway drug into everything else.

Participants also valued learning about the history of the Catholic Church. Learning the origin of the Catholic Church helped participants put the current Church in context. For example, one participant described how learning about Catholicism during the French Revolution inspired him to use Catholicism to go out and help others:

[He] taught me a lot about the historical context of faith, and how important it is to understand the history of what you stand for...it has helped me really find a purpose in Catholicism, because he specializes in like the French Revolution Catholicism and the fact that Catholicism was used to save people, and it was used as a tool to connect people, um, it's just inspiring to me and it gives me like a sense of purpose... after like interacting with [him] and understanding the historical context of what Catholicism does to serve others... I want to live my life by [this], I want to serve others... And so Catholicism...it has gone from this archaic idea to me to a like vehicle to serving others. Um, which again would be like common sense, but it took me like twenty years to get to, so yeah.

Another participant discussed being taught an honest history that did not overlook its imperfections. He understood the Church was not perfect and pretending that it was prevented him from learning the context in which the modern Catholic Church had been formed. A religious high school teacher, in addition to teaching the participant about prayer and the sacraments also taught him about the Church's complicated history:

Yes, he taught me about prayer, the sacraments, and he taught me about the stuff that the Catholic did do horrible... You know, Crusades, papal schism, the uh, um, the con- the conquests of Islam and you know the new world... He, don't get me wrong, he was supportive. He definitely was very faithful. It's just that he also had to realize that there's some stuff that the Church did that was wrong.

*Taught them how to pray.* In addition to learning about the Church and its history, adults taught participants how to pray. Most participants discussed learning to pray at home with their parents or another family member. This prayer may be before meals, in the car, when something bad happened, or before bed. One participant discussed how her family formed the tradition of praying together every night before bed while her younger brother was learning his prayers:

So my, um, brother's five years younger than me, and when he was learning his, like, nighttime prayers... we would all say them with him, and then it just turned into a nightly, regular routine... that still happens like if I go home for a weekend...which I think is cool...we would usually gather in my brother's

room... sit on his bed, or kneel on the floor...it was never super formal... [we would say] like, Our Father, Hail Mary, um, Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep... there's one that we do it, [laughs] we do it everybody has, like, a line that they say, [laughs] and, um, we, so, we go, there's five of us, and we go around and it's, "May God bless you and keep you, may he guide you in life, may he bless you this evening, and keep us in his sight"... Like, um, that's really cool, like, thinking about it out of that context, um, I like that one [laughs].

Another way parents taught participants how to pray was through the use of videos and songs. For example, one participant described a memory of learning to pray by watching a video of a bunch of kids singing:

My mom had a video tape for us of like how to pray the Our Father, or maybe it was the Rosary. It was like, it had a bunch of kids and they were singing the Our Father, that's all I remember, um, but like it sort of taught us how to praise.

*Reading the Bible with them.* Some participants enjoyed learning about their religion by reading the Bible with adults they were close to or their teachers. One participant discussed how her teacher would have them read parts of the Bible in class. Her teacher did not just read the story and move on. The class would dissect the story to discuss what different parts meant. The participant also talked about how his Catechism teacher used games to teach the different Bible stories and keep the students engaged:

I really liked- well we read, um, it was like those kid versions of the Bible which actually made sense, um, at the time and I really enjoyed it just because they- they made it fun because they'd ask people, "Ya know, what do you think of that sentence?" Or something. Um, they said, "Well this is what this means in this context, but did you guys- did you get it? Or did it not make sense?" And that was kinda cool, um, we always played games to energize us because...there's [only so much] time where you can study and learn this stuff on a Sunday [before] you're like, not gonna pay attention anymore.

*Taught science and religion as compatible.* Participants also appreciated having conversations in which an adult presented religion and science as compatible. Many stated religion and science being shown as compatible and not

at odds was a rarity for them (discussed in negative behaviors under the theme “teaching science and religion as opposites”). When the two fields were shown to be in agreement or alignment this helped the participants strengthen their religious affiliation because they did not feel like they had to give up science to be Catholic. For example, one participant described a discussion about the Big Bang with her mother:

Oh, yeah, there was so- I just remember having this conversation with my parents, and I was...pretty young at the time...I was telling my mom that I had two brains: one brain where I thought that God created the world in seven days, and one brain where the Big Bang created the world, and then my mom just went, “Well, who do you think started the Big Bang?” and it just blew my mind.

These conversations happened at home, but they also happened in the classroom too. For example, one participant discussed how hearing her science teacher make a passing comment to their class that you could be a scientist and believe in God stuck with her for years after the fact:

Like very randomly [my high school chemistry teacher] mentioned...and I’m pretty sure no one else remembers this, but um, that just because you’re a scientist doesn’t mean you can’t also believe in God...I think someone must of brought up evolution, then, and he brought that up. He was like you can believe in evolution and you can also believe that God created the world. And you don’t have to have some like separation between those two. And I thought that was really interesting... I like made a mental note of it.

***Modeled a Catholic lifestyle.*** Participants learned not only through conversations or lesson plans, but also reported their religious identity being influenced through watching adults live out their religion. Being able to see what a religious life looked like for a parent, family member or another adult made envisioning one for themselves easier. While modeling a Catholic lifestyle where the participant could see, adults often included the participant in their religious activities. Adults behaviors that modeled a Catholic lifestyle fell into four



categories: 1) owned or used religious materials 2) put religion into action, 3) participated at their parish, 4) seen “being Catholic” in daily life.

*Owned or used religious materials.* One way in which participants described adults modeling a Catholic lifestyle was through the ownership and use of religious materials. This included prayer books, Bibles, rosaries, religious media like CDs or movies, having a prayer altar in the home, or having religious pictures on the walls. One participant described witnessing her mom trying to get back in touch with her Catholicism by listening to the radio and watching Mass online:

But I know my mom definitely has been trying to get more into it because she would start listening to like, the rosary on the radio, and then she would like watch online Mass, and she would listen to K-Love and I’m just sitting in the car like, why are you listening?

Another participant talked about how as a child she always knew that her dad carried a rosary with him wherever he went, especially when he traveled for work. While she never saw him pray it, she knew it was special to him, which encouraged her to think about her own Catholicism:

My dad would travel a lot for work and he kept a rosary, um, with him, either, like in his car or in his pocket... just knowing that and seeing that was, uh, was cool for me because I didn’t really, like, talk about my faith with my dad, but just, like, seeing that he kept that close to him...just seeing that it was important and special to him encouraged me to think about, like, how my faith is important and special to me.

*Put religion into action.* Participants also took notice when they saw an adult putting their religion into action. Several participants mentioned Catholic adults who put their religion radically into action through mission work or dangerous social justice work. For example, one participant described a

priest/professor she met in college who had done work with human trafficking survivors and fought for peace within his home country:

Learning about his backstory with him, and everything that happened to him. Um, he had a very like, he came from p- a place of poverty and then he ended up becoming like a peace fighter, um, and then like he was targeted for certain things and it was just crazy and it could have been a freakin' action movie.

However, not all examples elicited excitement; most were simply individuals living their daily life with God in mind. For example, one participant described being allowed to witness a friend's family going about their regular schedule and how they included God in it:

In middle school I was in a small group with girls from my neighborhood and one of their moms was leading it, um, and... their family, that specific family, um, was really, they were very, like, faithful people, and everything they did revolved around, um, "what does God tell us to do?" and they read the Bible together, and, um... yeah, like, really lived their faith out together as a family and I--I saw that, and I think that influenced me a lot too, like having, um, I don't know, seeing faith in my own family and seeing it in another family in that context and being like, "this is a thing, this is normal and it's good."

*Participated at their parish.* The most common way participants reported seeing adults model a Catholic life style was through participating in a parish community. This involved attending mass (and bringing the participant along or seeing them there), volunteering at the parish, and bringing the participant to the parish for non-Mass related activities. In most cases, especially with family members, the adult was bringing a young participant to the parish with them.

One participant described attending daily Mass with her babysitter when she was very young. She stated those Masses as well as the other ways this woman witnessed in her life provided the stepping stones for her current religious affiliation:

Yeah, um...yeah um, and she would, I remember I haven't remembered this in a long time, she used to take me to daily Mass with her um, and she would just sit me down on the kneeler, with like some snacks and some coloring books and toys while she paid attention to the Mass and I'm just sitting there playing next to her like, we were not even anywhere. Um...and so that was really nice though. Like she definitely I feel, is a big part of um...my knowledge of my Catholic faith um because- I guess I think she really provided the stepping stones.

While most participants saw their parents and other adults going to Mass, not all saw their parents volunteering and being active within the parish community. One participant described how her parents used to volunteer at their parish and since they did not want to get a babysitter she was usually with them while they were there:

Um, and my dad and my mom have always been very involved in the Church, and I remember even being four years old they...would spend weekends running the baptism program at our church, and instead of finding a babysitter for me I would be in the sacristy organizing the candles and the bibs for the babies. So, I remember- like a lot of childhood memories are actually physically in my church, um in our parish.

Another example of an adult bringing her child to the parish out of Mass times was a mother who was involved in her church choir:

My mother worked- my mother sang in the choir for the church, she used to take me when I was a kid, and I remember that- it was- it was a fun experience just being in that, and like, seeing other people sing and like, what was that? I didn't- I knew no one, and like, I remember all that when I was a very, very young kid.

*Seen "being Catholic" in daily life.* Another way adults modeled a Catholic lifestyle was by being seen being Catholic in their daily life. This was particularly influential when the adult was a priest or a nun. Often religious people are seen by children (and adults) as holier and set apart from "normal" lay people. Being exposed to a priest going about his daily business like eating or seeing where they lived help normalize the priesthood for participants. This was

particularly true for one participant who worked with a group of priests and brothers who, himself, was possibly considering a call to religious life:

[I] always spent time in their office, um, taking part of the morning, uh, morning prayer, and evening prayer. And events that they would invite me to, when they had dinner in their homes... So that, that is what I mean, very involved in ministry. It wasn't [just] a job, um, I was very active in there.

Lay adults also were described as modeling a Catholic lifestyle in their daily life. While many participants mentioned not seeing their parents or other adults pray outside of church, those who saw their parents pray were affected by the experience. For example, one participant described how he always knew his parents prayed every night before bed in their room. His parents did not force prayer on him, but their prayer life was a constant he could count on and partake in if he wanted:

Um, so, I mean, when, they don't force me or, well, they never forced me, but, uh, they always pray and I am always invited to pray. Um, but it's up to me whether I join them or not. They pray every night. Uh, they have a little altar in the room. It's not huge, but it's really cute. And they pray there every night, and they- I know what time they're praying, and they know I know what time they pray, so they invite me and sometimes I go and sometimes I don't. Uh, but I do know that they- praying is always in my house, so.

A particularly poignant example of modeling a Catholic lifestyle was provided by one participant's parents who had had several miscarriages after she was born. Even in their grief, this participant's parents included God (and the Church) in their life. In the quote below, the participant describes a private ceremony her family would have, performed by her uncle who was a priest, to mourn the loss of her siblings:

Yeah, um, so they were usually private ceremonies said by my uncle... so I was always told that you know like, God decided it wasn't time to have a brother and sister so now they're an angel... those ceremonies I think were a lot of comfort for my mom and dad, especially 'cause there were at least three miscarriages between my brother and I, and so they were a way of comforting and recognizing

it...that brought a lot of comfort to my family that we acknowledged that there was a loss in the family and that there was a place for that soul that was lost.

*Respected other religions.* Participants appreciated and took note when the adults in their lives exposed them to other religions outside of Catholicism and were respectful of these other religions. Not only did respectful adults influence how participants saw other religions and Catholicism, but it also determined how influential a participant would allow an adult to be. Adults who were not respectful were not viewed positively by these Catholic-raised participants and therefore not seen as trustworthy sources of influence. Adults showed their respect for other religions by 1) exposing participants to other religions and 2) being willing to have multicultural or interreligious conversations.

*Exposed to other religions.* Adults who exposed participants to other religions often did so in the classroom either in history or world religion classes. For example, one participant described learning about different religions from a non-biased teacher. This teacher refused to tell her class with which religion she was affiliated so the teacher could not be accused of favoring one religion over another in the classroom. This allowed the participant to learn about and compare religions from a neutral viewpoint:

Mm.. I remember them being like, not so much non-religious, but they didn't – they weren't identifying as like one single religion. And so they like.. were able to non-biasedly teach all these different religions. And be able to like, not so much shine one in a bad light, versus another, but be able to like, teach me everything about what one was instead of leaving out things, so like sway my like view of them.

Participants who lived in multi-religious families described learning about and being exposed to non-Catholic religious practices by relatives such as a cousin's wife being a Buddhist, or a grandpa being raised Jewish. One participant

described growing up learning about Judaism and eating traditional Jewish foods because of her grandfather:

We—well growing up, yeah, ‘cause my grandpa, he was Jewish, so we would like talk about it ‘cause like, like, my mom like grew up with like that influence, and like, like, we would have the food and everything.

*Willing to have multicultural or interreligious conversations.* Adults

showed that they were respectful of other religions through being willing to have interreligious conversations. Similar to exposure to other religions, many of these conversations took place within a classroom setting. These teachers modeled respect for other religions in their classroom through their moderation of classroom discussion. One teacher was described as allowing students to try out religious dialogue but preventing it from getting too heated:

Um, the teacher for this class was definitely very good on making sure that students were able to give their voice but also not, um, not let things get too to a point that would be a hostile environment, um, so I think she’s good at being moderator of, if something got heated between classmates, especially with students who are from backgrounds that clash a whole lot, um, like Israel, Palestine, etcetera, that kind of being able to talk about it but also make sure that students are still being respectful.

Not all adults who showed respect for other religions were Catholic. One participant described having discussions with her Muslim friend and his family about their religion when she visited their Mosque with them for a school project. Even though she was Catholic, this Muslim family was willing to teach her about their religion and have conversations about the two religions:

I had asked him to take me to the mosque with him, because it was for a project at school. And, um, he had taken me to Ramadan dinner with his family, and then, um, we went back to his house and he gave me the burqa and what not, and then showed me how to pray when I was in the mosque so that I wouldn’t stand out like a sore thumb. Um, and so, and [his family and I] talked a lot about like what this means and like the separation between the mosque and all of these things. Um, and so it was a very enlightening experience.

*Connected to Catholic people and experiences.* Many participants discussed how adults in their lives had helped create connections between the participant and the Church. These connections could be interpersonal, experiential, or tangible items that influenced their views of Catholicism and personal narrative within the religion. Adults made connections to the Church in four ways: connecting to: 1) Catholic people, 2) Catholic experiences, 3) Catholic items, and 4) new ways to look at Catholicism.

*Catholic people.* An influential role an adult could play was to connect Catholic-raised participants to other Catholic adults. These connections helped expand the participants Catholic support network. This task involved encouraging participants to form relationships with religious, with Catholic lay adults, and people who could answer the participants' questions if the adult could not answer them themselves.

One mother, after finding out her son was gay, helped him get connected to a GLBT group at their parish. She could not understand what he was going through, but she could help him form bonds with Catholics who had walked a similar path: "I actually went to a couple [GLBT small group meetings] with my mom, because she was the one that kinda got me into it."

Another participant spoke of her parents encouraging her from an early age to form relationships with priests and other intelligent Catholics, so she could ask them questions about religion. Presenting priest, from an early age, as someone you could go up to if you had a question helped form those bonds:

I guess like, if I needed like, help or guidance or [had a] question about...God or Jesus, like I'd go to [my parents] and like I'd ask them, and then they'd be like,

um, they'd try to answer it the best they can and if they couldn't answer then they'd like tell me to go and talk to the priest if I, you know, had any questions about it.

*Catholic experiences.* Participants also described adults who connected them to Catholic experiences such as planning retreats and events for them to attend as well as encouraging them to sign up for church leadership positions.

One participant described how the youth director at their parish made sure the youth at their parish had plenty of opportunities to connect to their religion through mission trips and retreats:

Um, and yeah, she was a very supportive of us and our faith and, you know, she's also the one who like organized all the mission trips and the retreats and everything, so yeah we got so much from her, um, and I think she's the one that really attracted most of the youth in our community to faith.

For many participants, retreats were a gateway to more involvement with the parish and ownership of their Catholicism. A participant described how, after going on a retreat and forming a relationship with a priest at his parish, the priest helped him get connected to leadership opportunities:

So I started going on retreats and he gave me leadership opportunities... I love ministry job, I loved what I was doing, I love seeing other peop- love being a part of that part of my friends, um, encountering God and, um, exploring their faith.

*Catholic items.* Many of the adults mentioned by participants represent the idea that the Catholic Church is a Church of symbols. Adults strove to connect participants to their Catholicism through tangible symbols such as personalized Bibles, religious trinkets, jewelry honoring their Baptism, or a rosary.

For example, at the end of a retreat, an adult retreat leader gifted each of the youth in her small group a personalized Bible with their name in it and she had signed it. Whether this was the first Bible they had ever received or their one



hundredth, the adult knew when these youths looked at the Bible or read it, they would remember the retreat and the feelings they had felt there:

We all got like a personal Bible when we were with her and it had our name nicely engraved and she signed it, she put it a nice message inside of it, um, so we won't forget anything. We won't forget her or anything. Um, yeah.

Another adult—a grandmother—also tried to provide her granddaughter constant physical reminders of her Catholicism, especially if she was traveling. These small “trinkets” may seem insignificant, but having one in her room or on her bag could remind her of her grandmother and her religion on a regular basis:

She'll, like, give me little religious trinkets if I'm gonna go do something, like important, like, one time she dropped me off at the airport and she was like, really emotional. [ laughs.] Um she gave me a little card with the Virgin Mary on it. [When] she went to Mexico she brought me back like a keychain with the Virgin Mary on it.

*New ways to look at Catholicism.* Participants described many instances of being exposed to novel (at least in their eyes) ways of practicing Catholicism or ways of redefining the Catholicism they thought they knew. Witnessing a new way of practicing the Catholic religion or being given the chance to rediscover an old religious practice they had categorized as bad or scary made participants pause and reevaluate what they thought they knew about Catholicism.

For example, one participant described the shock she experienced seeing her grandmother praying at her home altar. She was not surprised her grandmother was praying, but that she was praying so publicly in a place that was not church. The participant had always been taught that religion was a private thing. So, to see her grandmother practicing so publicly gave her pause as she reevaluated what Catholic looked like:

Find [my grandmother] like, on her knees praying there...it's really interesting to me because like...I was always taught...religion is like a private thing...you don't do that in front of other people. And so...like seeing her... pray, um, in front of like the shrine... is kind of like... not so much confusing, but like, odd? ... The shrine is so public. Like why...why is she choosing there?

It is not uncommon for Catholic children (or Catholic adults) to say they are afraid of going to Confession either because of a bad experience or a general uneasiness around the sacrament. So, when one participant, who had a fear of Confession, was encouraged at a Catholic camp to go to Reconciliation during a Reconciliation service, they decided to push past their misgivings and go. Had the adult organizers of that camp not provided the opportunity, this participant likely would not have searched out Reconciliation at their parish. But because it was right there they went:

Well, being at the camp we had a Reconciliation and, uh, that was a really powerful experience for me because...I was afraid of it... [but] I went to confession and just had a really, basically just went and had a conversation with a priest, and he was like, "I absolve or your sins,"...I was like, "That was so cool!" Like, that meant a lot, to be able to talk about something that had been hurting me, um, have someone listen and know that, like, God was present...it changed my perception on the sacrament of reconciliation.

Another place where participants were connected to novel ways of viewing Catholicism was the classroom. One participant described how learning about "Liberation Theology" in a university class helped her realize that her views of right and wrong were actually aligned with that of the Church. Learning her views of social justice had a name and that it was an underlining principle in Catholic social teaching helped her to strengthen her connection to her Catholicism:

[My] Latin-American Theology class...centered around liberation theology, [which] completely changed the way that I saw Catholicism... Because...he was able to explain to me that liberation theology is this idea of helping the

marginalized help themselves. Not you helping them. And like to get out of their situations of violence, of poverty, of etcetera, um really like struck a chord with me because...I had never heard of anything along those lines. But I had always felt something along those lines.

**Negative behaviors.** Not all experiences with influential adults that were discussed by participant were seen as positive experiences. Behaviors participants associated with discouraging them from interacting with an adult and adding to a negative outlook on the Catholic fell into six categories: 1) provided conditional support, 2) lacked/discouraged religious conversations, 3) taught incorrect religious information, 4) did not model a Catholic lifestyle 5) disrespected other religions, and 6) negative connections to Catholic activities. These negative behaviors of influential adults also discouraged the participant from viewing the religion the adult practiced (usually Catholicism) positively. Negative behavior main themes as well as each subtheme can be found summarized in Table 7.

***Providing conditional support.*** Participants often disengaged from and even felt betrayed by adults who they believed provided only conditional support. Conditional support is the inverse of unconditional support, in which a participant was confident of and often reassured that the adult's affection, approval, or love was not tied to whether the individual was Catholic or not. For Previously-Catholic participants, conditional support was defined as an adult withholding support or actively being unsupportive if/when a participant decided to not be Catholic. For Currently-Catholic participants, conditional support manifested as the knowledge that they may anger or lose the respect of an adult if they decided to not be Catholic. Two conditional support themes emerged; 1) actively did not

support participant's religious identity and 2) participant hid current religious identity from adult.

*Actively did not support participant's religious identity.* When an adult was actively not supportive, this may involve yelling or calling the participant's new religious identity or lack of religion "stupid." Other adults withheld affection or praise when a participant disclosed they were questioning their religious identity or wanted/had already made the decision to stop being Catholic. For example, one participant described the roller coaster of support they received from their parents as they questioned their religious affiliation with the Catholic Church:

At times, I would say any time I strayed away from the faith, or any time I questioned the faith they were very like; "You can't do that", um, and I was like "I don't care" [laughs], but any time I was like "Yeah, I'm going to church, oh yeah" they were always like "that's awesome, like keep going" like "so proud of you", um, and so they made it very clear when they weren't approving of it.

*Participant hid current religious identity from adult.* Seven Previously-Catholic participants stated they were currently hiding their religious identity from at least one adult in their life. Many examples revolved around grandparents. For example, one participant described her apprehension of disclosing her Atheism to her grandmother:

Um... sometimes I feel crappy. Like I don't want my Grandma to know, but she's always like, right now she wants to see me get married with my boyfriend. [laugh] And... Like, I don't, I don't want her to... to like know I'm an Atheist, I feel like she'll, I don't think she'll disown me but I feel like she'll be so upset. [laugh.] yeah.

Others were less concerned about an angry reaction, but instead they did not want the adult to be sad or disappointed in them. Some even felt like they had let the adult down. For example, one participant stated:

I feel like, [she'll be] sad and worried. And I don't want to do that to her. Yeah...I don't want her to freak out, so yeah, I don't want her to know.

*Lacked/Discouraged religious conversations.* Many participants discussed a lack of adults who they had had conversations about religion with or adults in their life who would bring up religion with them. Others discussed adults who had negative reactions when a participant brought up religion or had a question. Some adults would answer the religious question but either was not willing or was not able to give an answer beyond “that is how we do things” or “because the Church tells us to.” Three subthemes emerged around talking about religion that participants felt influenced their religious identity formation: 1) did not discuss religion, 2) negative reaction to doubt or questions, and 3) “because I said so”.

*Did not discuss religion.* Adults likely did not discuss religion with these participants for a multitude of reasons. They may be private or uncomfortable in their own religious identity so discussing it with someone who has questions may be uncomfortable. Others may not be knowledgeable enough to have the discussions and be embarrassed by their lack of knowledge. For teachers at non-religious schools they may not be allowed to openly discuss religion with the participant. Regardless of the reason, especially with adults the participant felt close to, not having adults to discuss religion with was a common theme. For example, one participant described the lack of religious discussion, beyond the surface level, with their parents:

You know we, I mean we never talked about God in general. I mean when I was a kid, I would be like, “Oh, what’s God?” You know, they’re like big floating man, but it was very simplistic, they kept it very simple you know, and we never really discussed it, we just did it, you know, it was just a thing we did.

*Negative reaction to doubt or questions.* Other adults prevented participants from wanting to ask questions or engage in discussion through reacting negatively when a participant asked a question or expressed doubt. This also manifested through negative reactions if a participant voiced, what the adult considered, an un-Catholic opinion (pro-choice, pro-evolution, pro-birth control, not wanting to go to Mass, etc.). These negative reactions varied. Some adults called the thought or question sinful. For example, participant described her grandmother's reaction to her not wanting to go to Mass:

I'd say that I started sort of not wanting to go to church on Sundays...and my grandma didn't like this, she said it was like, "Only non-believers didn't go to church" and uh she would get really mad at me, but we'd still go anyways.

Other adults dismissed questions as unimportant, which frustrated participants. One participant felt they had genuine concerns they wanted answered but felt dismissed by their Catechism teachers. The participant stated, "I remember, especially within communion...I know I definitely asked things at times and they just kinda dismissed them...and as I grew older, I would ask more difficult questions that they didn't necessarily like."

Some adults would take the questioning and doubting personally and refuse to speak to the participant until they started acting like they were supposed to. For example, one participant's mom gave her the silent treatment when she asked, "why do we go to Mass every week":

I remember high school...like [asking myself] why [go to Mass], it's not like we're...essential to it, like we just go to church for – like for what? What are you learning? Like weekly? And like, I actually asked my mom that, she looked at me like I slapped her in the face...so then, we had this huge fight about it and – like my mom when she fights with me, she doesn't speak to me and expects me to do what she wants me to do anyway.

*“Because I said so”*. Another way adults shut down religious conversations with participants was through saying “because I said so” or “because God says so” or “because the Bible says so” as the definite answer when asked a question about why the Church, or that adult in particular, believed something. This theme was not limited to Catholic adults either. As one participant describes, his Christian mother would not give him logical reasons for believing something but instead would just say “‘Cause God says so”:

My mom, on the other hand, was really negative in which she was—even though she wasn’t a Catholic, she was Christian, so it was the same idea principles. So, but the problem was that she was always really strict with Christianity. She would not give any logical explanation of why should I do something right, that Go- it’s ‘cause God says so.

Another participant compared their family’s “because the Bible says so” answer he received growing up to his experience being taught a nuanced and historically grounded view of the Bible in college. These discussions, or rather lack of discussions, growing up frustrated him. He was searching and trying to engage with his religion but was not being given the answers he needed:

When I did voice [concerns] I was kind of like shot down and told, like there’s a black and white text that tells you you can’t believe this. Um, and we never talked about the contradictions in the Bible, and we never talked about how things have to be viewed through the lens which they were written, and those were really the things that I developed once I got to college and was able to reconcile a lot of that, but during that time I didn’t have that and so it was very frustrating.

One participant discussed, that he felt his family respond to questioning with “because it is” because they were not confident in their answers and so it was a way of getting out of the conversation without looking stupid:

Like – I – every time I ask questions from my family, it’s always like, “because it is.” It always gets shut down, like it’d always get shut down, um, depending how

confident with what I'm asking. Um, and most of the time I'm like, they're not confident at all.

***Taught incorrect religious information.*** Many participants discussed being taught information that (unbeknownst to them) was in direct contradiction with Catholic teaching that often left a bad taste in their mouth and made them question whether or not this was the correct religious identity for them. This incorrect information may have made them dislike the Church for reasons that were not actually factual or may have incorrectly explained a concept the participant relied on and was then betrayed by; such as prayer. Teaching incorrect religious information manifested in three sub-themes: 1) talking badly about the Church or its beliefs, 2) teaching science and religion as opposites, and 3) teaching prayer as a fix all.

***Talked badly about the Church or its beliefs.*** Adults who talked badly about the Church or Catholic beliefs were both non-Catholics as well as Catholic. For adults who came from outside the Catholic Church such as non-Catholic family members or ministry workers of other religions, a common theme was that Catholics were going to Hell for their beliefs. For example, one participant discusses his grandmother who converted from Catholicism to some denomination of Christianity and was concerned her family was going to go to Hell for being Catholic. Therefore, she wanted to convert them to save their souls:

You know, 'cause for the longest time my grandma was a lazy Catholic like all of us, and then she became like uber Christian and said like, "Oh you know, Catholicism got it wrong." And I'm like you know, "How?" "We're all gonna rot" and I'm like, te quiero mucho [laughs]...she's always like telling my mom like, "You gotta convert! You gotta convert! Catholics, they're all lazy." And I'm like, oh my God Grandma. You know, but like, that's all. She's a wonderful lady, don't get a bad impression of her.



While Catholic-raised youth may be hearing anti-Catholic sentiments from non-Catholics, others struggled with adults who were supposed to be Catholic but spoke negatively about the Church. For example, one participant discussed the struggle between their mother and their father around religion. Their mother was a practicing Catholic who went to Mass while their father spent most of his time criticizing Catholicism:

Oh, he was constantly making fun of everything. Um which really again upset my mom. Um, but you know I do remember him you know folding his hands at dinner, I do remember him coming to church a few times with us. Um, but that was again when I was really young. Um and you know he um like when he would go to church he would spend the whol – most of the time making fun of the singing. Um, but yeah he was always *very* critical of *EVERYTHING*. Um, he never... I mean... he saw it as this chore.

*Taught science and religion as opposites.* Another form of incorrect information participants received from adults, was that religion and science were opposites and you could not believe in one while believing in the other. For example, you could not believe in a God-created universe and evolution at the same time. Unlike with the adults who showed participants how to reconcile the two ideas, these adults did not appear to be open to that type of questioning, so the participant kept silent and concluded the Church was opposed to science. Adults did not even need to specifically say that religion and science were opposites. If participants did not hear the message that science and religion were compatible, to many this was the same as hearing that the two concepts were opposites. For example, one participant felt unable to ask about evolution and creation because of her teacher's demeanor in class:

I always remember whenever we would learn about Adam and Eve in class, I would always wanna ask my teachers about evolution, um, and how at least maybe they view it, um, in context with religion but I didn't want to like get in

trouble or like stir up the pot so I never asked... uh it would definitely be frowned upon as like a child to ask those kind of questions... We weren't really allowed to speak up... we would get in trouble...the way she was talking about Adam and Eve, she was very passionate about the story... "We could've lived this way but we as humans messed it up" and I was like I'm not gonna bring this up to her at all [laughs]... One of my other teachers was a little bit nicer...[with her] it was more of like...I didn't want to disrespect...her beliefs... [or] like ruin it for other kids if that's what they believed.

*Taught prayer as a fix-all.* Another short and insufficient response

identified adults would give participants was "to pray about it" as if prayer was a fix all solution whether that be depression, a sick grandmother, or struggling at school with friends. This answer that felt like a brush-off to many participants frustrated them and discouraged them from reaching out to adults who used this response. It made them feel like their problems were being trivialized. For example, one participant discussed the adult youth group leaders at their church who presented prayer as a fix-all:

In high school...I got even more frustrated because...I was going through a lot of things, they were like, "You just need to pray. You just need to do this." It was like, this isn't magic, you can't just tell me do this, this isn't helping me. And nobody really [helped]...I had to do things myself...because I was definitely not going to ask the annoying adults in the youth group.

Other participants described getting similar advice from their parents at home. Instead of helping the participant work through their problems and having prayer as one of the tools, this mother used "pray about it" as a way to, in the participant's opinion, not have the in-depth conversation the participant wanted and need about a topic:

If I was struggling with something, my mom would say "pray about it" and that was kind of the extent of it, it was never like a very in-depth like discussion... it was always like "just pray about it" or like "have faith in God, have faith in the plan."

Other parents also used prayer, or rather lack of prayer, retroactively as a reason why events did not turn out the way the participant wanted. For example, one participant's mom blamed the participant's bad grade on them not praying frequently enough or going to Mass enough. The participant said, "My mom was like, she'd always like, say something – like if I got a bad grade on a test, 'it's because you didn't pray enough,' or it's 'because you didn't go to church enough.'"

*Doesn't model a Catholic lifestyle.* Unlike adults who modeled what it looked like to be Catholic in their daily life and acted as influential role models to participants, other adults did not model these behaviors. This may take the form of an adult who claimed the Catholic identity verbally but did not "act like one" in the eyes of the participant. This theme had four subthemes: 1) seen as a "Nominal Catholic", 2) infrequently/did not attend Mass, 3) did not model Catholic morals, and 4) did not pray in front of participant.

*Seen as a "Nominal Catholic."* Nominal Catholics were adults whom participants felt were Catholic in name only. These adults may only do Catholic things like go to Mass, send their children to Catechism classes, or receive the sacraments because it is what they are supposed to do, or it is what their family does. In one example, a participant described how she and her brother were only raised Catholic because their mother did not want to disappoint or anger her mother (their grandmother). The participant reflected:

My grandma was always like very controlling... she had power over my mom. So, my mom had my brother and I...like go through, like she had us both be raised Catholic, because um like that's what my grandma wanted.

Another way family pressures lead to nominal Catholics was through family tradition. One participant described how they felt their Dad only went through the motions of going to church because he was Italian and that is what Italians do; “Cause- like he’s a Catholic, but like...I think it’s just ‘cause his family was Italian. They’re all Catholics.”

While these first two examples were based on observations of adults (usually their parents) “phoning it in,” other adults actively talked to participants about their lack of interest in being Catholic even though they go through the motions. For example, one participant described an interaction she had with her father once before going to Mass; “My father’s always kind of been like, “We have to go but trust me, I don’t want to go. I don’t want to go either.” Seeing these adults actively not living a Catholic lifestyle while claiming the identity greatly influenced how participants saw those adults and what it meant to identify as Catholic.

*Infrequently/Did not attend Mass.* Another way adults did not model a Catholic lifestyle was through their Mass attendance. Catholics believe you must go to church at least once a week. For participants who had adults (usually their parents) who only went to Mass when it was convenient or infrequently went, participants found it hard to take going to Mass seriously:

[Then I started living with] my mom full-time. And she still went to church Sundays, but it wasn’t as much of a routine as it was with my grandmother, and it was mostly like whenever we could make it, but... as soon as I completed my Confirmation, it kinda became more like uh I guess we’ll go now cuz we have nothing else to do today and then it kinda like dwindled away.

Other participants discussed only going to Mass with their Catholic parents for holidays (Christmas and Easter) or special events (funerals, weddings,

baptisms). If participants were not being taken to Mass, they likely would not make it a part of their own adult life. For example, one participant stated, “In our family we really didn’t go to church on Sundays or anything. We’d go like once every couple of years probably, so um, we celebrated all the holidays, though.”

*Did not model Catholic morals.* Participants also struggled to bond with, and therefore learn about Catholicism, from adults who they felt were immoral or acted immorally in front of or toward the participant. One example of this theme was provided by a participant who found out the priest she and a lot of their parish really liked was stealing money from the Church. This caused her to question all priests and if they could be trusted:

Um, he was always telling jokes and so he was much more under- like understanding and just like much more of a people’s priest... Then...he ended up stealing money from the parish. Um, so while you have this awesome priest who’s very understanding, and like all of the kids within CCD and...schools, um, love him and like are like enjoy talking to him and all of these things, he then steals money from the parish and so he ends up getting booted out. Once I figured that out, I found a lot other more problems [like the priest molestation scandal] within the clergy... And so, when I found that out I was like dude, how are we trusting these people?

However, instances of immoral behavior were not always illegal. For example, one participant discussed how her Catechisms teacher (who was also the mother of her current boyfriend) allowed personal matters to cloud her role as a mentor and role model. Because the participant was dating her son, this teacher was actively mean to the female participant and often questioned her virtue because she was concerned the participant would lead her son to sin by seducing him into having sex with her. This lack of trust and condescension closed any door to role modeling for this teacher in a one-on-one capacity. In addition, the participant and her family eventually left that parish because the mean teacher had

too much power within the community that they felt they had no other choice but to leave if they wanted to have a supportive place to worship. The participant stated:

Um, and then things took a turn for the worse I started dating one of my Confirmation teacher's son [laughs] which was not a good choice, um, because then religion turned from this really like safe thing...I never want to go to church anymore because my...Confirmation teacher didn't like me... she was very concerned about like my virtues, um, and so it became this place where I just never wanted to go and she was one of those people that was like, she would read at Mass and she was like, she was a Confirmation teacher, she was very well respected, and so the fact that she didn't like me made me feel really [out of place] at church.

*Did not pray in front of participant.* Non-supportive behavior did not need to be active or overt. Often a lack of a behavior, such as not going to Mass (as shown above) or not praying/being seen praying, spoke as loudly as the presence of a negative behavior. Compared to participants who prayed with their parents or saw their parents praying, or heard an adult talk about their prayer life, if participants did not see prayer modeled by people they respected they likely would not institute it in their own lives.

For example, one participant mentioned: "I definitely never saw my parents, or like knew of them praying on their own." Another participant stated: "I don't think I've ever seen my dad pray outside of church." It is important to note that this does not mean the adult was not praying privately on their own, only that the participant was not exposed to the practice physically or told about it later. One participant talked about how she never saw her parents pray except when really bad things happened:

I never saw my parents pray...the only time I've ever seen my mom pray was when... my cousin had passed away, um... she, I just remember her being like, she didn't tell what was going on and then I just remember seeing her like, on her

knees in her room and like, talking to God, and I was like, I didn't understand what was going on and that was the only time I had seen either of my parents like, actively pray.

*Disrespected other religions.* Participant did not favor adults who they viewed as being disrespectful of other religions or who presented Catholicism as the only moral answer in an otherwise evil world. Participants discussed the behavioral theme of disrespecting other religions and how this disrespect influenced their religious identity formation in two subthemes: 1) spoke badly about other religions and 2) presented Catholic as good and all else as bad.

*Spoke badly about other religions.* Two examples of an adult speaking badly about another religion were overt Islamophobia as well as non-Catholics, such as the nondenominational grandmother above, saying Catholics were going to Hell. This demonizing of the other made participants less willing to engage in conversations about religion because they only experienced hatred. For example, one participant discussed how after attending a mosque with a Muslim school friend for a class project, her family reacted negatively to her posting about it online:

Oh my god, did you see what [she] put on Facebook? Like, is she converting? And all of these things. Um, because they think, they equate Islam with being the oppression of women, um, but they don't see the oppression of women within Catholicism, and so I was like very upset over that whole process. Um, because I wasn't converting, I was just trying to understand someone else's faith and how they express that.

She also felt her dad showed a dislike for the idea of her going to the Mosque. The participant saw this as Islamophobia because she felt his concerns and dislike for her friend and the opportunity to attend a Mosque were irrational and based in hatred. In the end, her mother, whom she felt was more respectful of

other religions, had to conspire with her on how to convince her dad to be okay with her going to the Mosque:

Um, and so I think she taught me a lot more to like go and talk to people of different faith, and not necessarily see them as being bad. Um, because my dad did a lot more of that, and like was demonizing and like a lot of like Islamophobia came from him. And I just never liked that since I was a kid... my mom literally like fed me the lies to tell him so that I'd be able to go as well, because she was like it's just an interesting thing for you to do anyways, it doesn't matter, um that they're Muslim and you are not.

Another participant stopped attending a Methodist youth group with her Christian friends because the youth group leader spoke about how Catholic all were going to Hell for their beliefs:

Um in middle school...I started going to, um, like, youth group... at the Methodist church... with some of my friends, [but then] ...the leader... mentioned, like, "Catholics... um, they're going to Hell" ... I remember going home... crying about it... 'cause I was Catholic... after that it became harder to, you know, talk with those specific friends about faith.

*Presented Catholic as good and all else as bad.* Similar to the characteristic "black and white," participants did not appreciate adults who presented Catholicism as the only way to be good and portrayed all other view points as not only illogical but also immoral. For example, one participant who identified as Atheist, discussed how her grandmother judged all people who were not Catholic and dismissed them as immoral and shameful. For a participant struggling with her own beliefs, this did not bring her comfort or closure but instead made her hide her beliefs from her grandmother:

I guess it was...like this is the only way, there is no other way, um, this is the only thing you can believe. Anything else is bad...Um, she might've been somebody that was talking about like the immorality of atheists or other religions, just because she's very judgmental about everything really...yeah so...it was, um, kind of like you have to believe in this, there's no other option,



it's the only (sigh) only path for morality, righteousness, um, if you don't follow it you're like a shame to the family.

*Negative connections to Catholic activities.* Participant did not speak fondly of the influence of adults who provided negative connections to Catholic activities. Unlike adults who connected Catholic-raised participants to leadership opportunities, other Catholic adults, and religious experiences, in these instances these adults either; 1) excluded participant from parish activities or 2) forced participant to do religious activities.

*Excluded participants from parish activities.* Participants discussed wanting to take part in their parish community but being prevented from participating by an adult. This exclusion was usually because an adult did not think it was appropriate for someone of their age or gender to participate in the given ministry at Mass. For example, one female participant discussed wanting to be an altar server at Mass because it looked cool. However, her dad told her girls were not allowed to be altar servers. It is unclear whether this decision came from the dad or if this was the decision of their parish priest or dioceses. Regardless, the participant discussed holding a grudge over her resentment of not being allowed to participate in Mass for over 10 years:

Um, and so I wanted to be an altar server, but my dad told me that I wasn't allowed to because girls are not allowed to be altar servers. And so, I held a grudge about that for a long time... I was upset at the fact that like girls couldn't be altar servers, but boys could. And then, jumping a little bit, like when I was 14 or 15, um, they allowed girls to become altar servers in my church, and I like reminded my dad of the fact that he told me no.

In another example, a participant wanted to help at Mass by doing a reading or other Mass ministries, but her parish (either the priest or the adults in charge of Mass volunteers) prevented her from signing up. As she states in the

quote, she felt this was because they saw her as too young to participate which she did not like. Instead of empowering this teen who wanted to be actively involved in Mass, they decided to exclude her:

Um...high school I mean I tried to...be like I tried to participate with the Masses that they had, but they didn't really allow like young teens to like be working the Masses like do any of the readings or like anything of that which I didn't like. They were just very—I don't know, they probably thought like you know, teens would goof.

*Forced participant to do religious activities.* Another way adults negatively connected participants to religious activities was by forcing participants to attend or participate in activities they had no interest in attending. One example of this was when a parent tried to force their child to attend Mass on Sundays:

Um... but she like, tries to force me to go to church like, she's like, "you're going," and I'm like .... I'm not going. And like...adamantly for like an hour before church is like, "you're going." And "I'm not going." "You're going." "I'm not going." "You're going!" "I'm not going!" And she'd like, leave with a fuss. She's like .... Exactly like my mom. Um ... she'd like, try to force me, but I'm not – I wouldn't go so she'd get mad.

Similar feelings were voiced by participants who were forced to attend Catechism classes:

I remember... maybe third grade or fourth... one of- my brother and I just we did NOT wanna do [Sunday School] anymore. We were fighting and arguing, saying we don't understand what this means, we don't really care. Um, you know we have other things to do in the world, like video games, read stuff or do our homework- which we would never really do. But um, I think our parents said you're gonna do it because we- you're already on the path to like, you know, getting Communion, Confirmation. Once that's in, you are older, so then you can make your choice. So we kind of thought ok, let's deal with it. We're almost there.

## Behavior Themes Categorized by Adult Type

Similarly to characteristic themes, the discussion on positive and negative behaviors is incomplete without a clearer understanding of whom is performing these behaviors. In Table 9, the positive and negative behaviors themes described by Catholic-raised young adults are broken down by the type of adult who was being described when the behavior was mentioned.

*Table. 9 Behavior themes categorized by adult type*

	Family	Parish	School	Rel		
				Event	Group	Other
Positive Behaviors						
Providing unconditional support	15	0	1	0	0	0
Facilitated/Had Religious discussions	24	26	19	8	0	6
Taught about the Catholic religion	16	22	24	1	2	3
Modeled a Catholic lifestyle	25	16	7	2	2	4
Respected other religions	8	1	17	0	2	3
Connected youth to Catholic people/experiences	14	15	8	4	0	1
Negative Behaviors						
Providing conditional support	11	2	3	0	0	4
Lacked/Discouraged religious discussions	23	6	7	0	1	2
Taught incorrect religious information	9	1	1	0	0	1
Did not model a Catholic lifestyle	21	3	4	0	3	0
Disrespected other religions	5	0	0	0	1	0
Negative connections to Catholic activities	13	2	1	0	1	0

When discussing influential adults whose behavior they saw as positive, most stories came from *family*, *parish*, and *school* adults. This pattern differed regarding *providing unconditional support* and *respected other religions*. Apart from one *school* adult, stories of *providing unconditional support* were only paired with *family* adults. *Respected other religions* was most common in *school*

adults but also seen in *family* adults. When discussing adults whose behavior they saw as negative, stories overwhelmingly came from *family* adults.

**Research Question 4: Comparing Adults Mentioned by Currently-Catholic and Previously-Catholic Participants**

**Types of adults.** Currently-Catholic participants described between six and 20 adults (*Mdn* = 14.00) and previously-Catholic participants described between three and 17 adults (*Mdn* = 12.50) during their interviews. There was no statistically significant difference between the number of adults listed by Currently-Catholic and Previously-Catholic adults;  $U = 49.50, p = 0.19$ . The median number of each adult type reported by participant’s religion can be found in Table 10.

*Table 10. Median number of each adult type identified by each religious identity group*

Type of Adult	Currently -Catholic <i>Mdn</i>	Previously -Catholic <i>Mdn</i>	<i>Mann-Whitney</i> <i>U</i>
Family	3.00	3.00	56.50
Parish	3.50	3.00	43.50
School	2.50	2.00	62.50
Other Adults	0.50	0.00	61.00
Rel. Event Adults	1.00	0.00	34.00*
Groups	1.00	0.00	70.00

Regarding the type of adults reported by the two groups, the only adult grouping where Currently-Catholic and Previously-Catholic participants differed significantly were with the median number of religious event adults they reported. Currently-Catholic participants reported a significantly higher median number of religious event adults (*Mdn* = 1.00) than Previously-Catholic participants (*Mdn* = 0.00);  $U = 34.00, p = 0.01$ . Only one Previously-Catholic participant listed a

religious event adult during their interview while seven Currently-Catholic participants discussed religious event adults. There were no other adult type groupings in which the Currently-Catholic and Previously-Catholic median differed significantly.

In the parish setting, Currently-Catholic and Previously-Catholic participants reported similar numbers of influential catechism teachers, clergy, and nuns. Where the two groups differed was in regard to number of parish ministry staff they discussed during their narratives. Only one Previously-Catholic participant mentioned being influenced by a parish ministry staff member, whereas eight Currently-Catholic participants mentioned parish ministry staff members.

#### **Characteristics of identified adults.**

**Positive characteristics.** Mann-Whitney U tests comparing the median number of adults who were identified by each participant as exhibiting at least one or more of positive characteristics subthemes were run to compare the Currently-Catholic participants and Previously-Catholic participants. Currently-Catholic participants mentioned significantly more adults ( $Mdn = 1.00$ ) who exhibited “authentic” characteristics than Previously-Catholic participants ( $Mdn = 0.50$ );  $U = 33.00, p = 0.02$ . No other positive characteristics differed significantly between the two religion subgroups. All positive and negative characteristic medians are summarized in Table 11.

Table 11. Median number of adults who exhibited each personality characteristic as identified by each religious identity group

	Currently-Catholic <i>Mdn</i>	Previously-Catholic <i>Mdn</i>	Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>
Positive Characteristics			
Intelligent	0.50	0.00	66.00
Engaging Personality	3.00	1.00	47.50
Approachable	4.00	2.50	52.00
Authentic	1.00	0.50	33.00*
Negative Characteristics			
Lack of Knowledge	0.00	1.00	50.00
Unengaging Personality	1.00	2.00	40.00
Unapproachable	1.00	3.00	37.00*
Disingenuous	0.00	1.00	47.00

Note. \* = p-value < 0.05

**Negative characteristics.** Mann-Whitney U tests comparing the median number of adults who were identified by each participant as exhibiting one or more of negative characteristics subthemes were run to compare the Currently-Catholic participants and Previously-Catholic participants. Currently-Catholic participants mentioned significantly more adults ( $Mdn = 1.00$ ) who exhibited “authentic” characteristics than Previously-Catholic participants ( $Mdn = 3.00$ );  $U = 37.00, p = 0.04$ . No other negative characteristics differed significantly between the two religion subgroups.

### Behaviors of Identified Adults

**Positive behaviors.** Mann-Whitney U tests comparing the median number of adults who were identified by each participant as exhibiting at least one or more of positive behavior subthemes were run to compare the Currently-Catholic participants and Previously-Catholic participants. Currently-Catholic participants mentioned significantly more adults ( $Mdn = 5.50$ ) who “facilitated/had

discussions about religion” than Previously-Catholic participants ( $Mdn = 1.00$ );  $U = 32.50, p = 0.02$ . No other positive behaviors differed significantly between the two religion subgroups. All positive and negative characteristic descriptives are summarized in Table 12.

Table 12. Median number of adults who exhibited each behavior type as identified by each religious identity group

	Currently-Catholic <i>Mdn</i>	Previously-Catholic <i>Mdn</i>	Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>
Positive Behaviors			
Provided unconditional support	1.00	1.00	57.00
Facilitated/Had discussions about religion	5.50	1.00	32.50*
Taught about the Catholic religion	3.00	3.00	69.00
Modeled a Catholic lifestyle	2.50	2.00	54.50
Respected other religions	1.00	1.00	69.50
Connected youth to Catholic people/experiences	2.00	1.00	54.00
Negative Behaviors			
Provided conditional support	0.00	1.00	22.00*
Lacked/Discouraged religious conversations	0.50	2.00	24.00*
Taught incorrect religious information	0.00	0.50	72.00
Did not model a Catholic lifestyle	0.50	2.00	33.00*
Disrespected other religions	0.00	0.00	56.00
Negative connections to Catholic activities	0.00	1.00	35.00*

Note. \* = p-value < 0.05

**Negative behaviors.** Mann-Whitney U tests comparing the median number of adults who were identified by each participant as exhibiting at least one or more of negative behavior subthemes were run to compare the Currently-Catholic participants and Previously-Catholic participants. Previously-Catholic participants mentioned, significantly more adults ( $Mdn = 1.00$ ) who “provided conditional support” than Currently-Catholic participants ( $Mdn = 0.00$ );  $U = 22.00, p = 0.001$ . Previously-Catholic participants mentioned, significantly more

adults ( $Mdn = 2.00$ ) who “lacked/discouraged religious conversations” than Currently-Catholic participants ( $Mdn = 0.50$ );  $U = 24.00, p = 0.004$ . Previously-Catholic participants mentioned, significantly more adults ( $Mdn = 2.00$ ) who “did not model a Catholic lifestyle” than Currently-Catholic participants ( $Mdn = 0.50$ );  $U = 33.00, p = 0.018$ . Previously-Catholic participants mentioned, significantly more adults ( $Mdn = 1.00$ ) who provided “negative connections to Catholic activities” than Currently-Catholic participants ( $Mdn = 0.00$ );  $U = 35.00, p = 0.018$ . The other two negative behaviors did not differ significantly between the two religion subgroups.

## **Discussion**

This study provides several insights into the experiences of Catholic-raised youth and the adults present during their experience growing up Catholic that participants felt influenced their religious identity development and eventual identity decision. These influential adults present during the religious identity decision making process come from various contexts within the participants’ lives such as their family, parishes, schools, geographical communities, their global travels, and other areas of their support system: family friends, doctors, parents of friends, etc. However, while the types of adults and the level of influence they wielded regarding the participant’s religious identity formation varied, what youth wanted from and valued in these adults was relatively consistent even when current religious identity was considered.

While some themes emerged more frequently among Currently-Catholic participants than Previously-Catholic participants and vice versa, there were many



common themes emerging within both groups. The homogeneity of the personality and behavior themes is particularly interesting given the intentionally diverse and representative sample of Catholic-raised youth regarding their gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity. Regarding personality characteristics participants valued in adults and felt inclined them toward/drove them away from the Catholic religion included: *intelligence* versus *lacking knowledge*, *engaging personality* versus *unengaging personality*, *approachable* versus *unapproachable*, and *authentic* versus *disingenuous*. Regarding behaviors, participants tended to favor and accept the influential presence of adults who: *provided unconditional support* versus *conditional support*, *facilitated/had discussions about religion* versus *lacked/discouraged religious conversations*, *taught about the Catholic religion* versus *taught incorrect religious information*, *did or did not model a Catholic lifestyle*, *respected or disrespected other religions*, and *connected youth to Catholic experiences/people* versus *negative connections to Catholic activities*.

This study's findings regarding the similarities between positive and negative behavior and characteristic themes contribute key themes Catholic communities may focus on fostering as they support parents raising Catholic children and in their training of ministry and teaching staff. For many adults influencing a youth's current and future religious identity, they may not know they are discouraging a Catholic affiliation through their behavior. This is especially true if the adult has intentionally put themselves in a position meant to positively influence and foster religious learning and affiliation such as a Catechism teacher, a youth minister, priest, deacon, nun/brother, religion teacher,

or Godparent/Confirmation sponsor. Bringing examples of what not to do as well as what to do may provide the opportunity for adults to be more mindful of their potential influence in their interactions with Catholic youth.

While more comparison research is needed, this study acts as a testament to the relevance of supportive adult literature in the discussion of how to support Catholic-raised youth. While only one study, the current study shows the similarities between what Catholic-raised youth want from and are drawn to in adults related to their religious identity formation and what the literature has shown youth want from adults in secular settings such as school, on sports teams, and community programs.

### **Parents as a Gateway or Gatekeeper to Religious Settings**

This study and previous research done on the influence of parents in the religious identity formation of youth supports the saying that religion starts at home with the family (Dudley & Dudley, 1986; Erickson, 1992; Hoge, Petrillo, & Smith, 1982; Martin, White, & Perlman, 2003; Sherkat, 1998; Smith, 2005; 2009; McCarty & Vitek, 2018). All participants discussed their parents and their either supportive or non-supportive influence in their religious identity exploration and decision. Findings from this study suggest the first examples of religion often come from parents. Participant narratives always started with the parents as the first adults mentioned before moving outward into other influential areas of life.

Within many families, parents may act as the gatekeepers and schedulers for a good portion if not all a youth's childhood (Hoge, 1992; Martin et al., 2003). Because of the influential role parents play in determining the schools, churches,

and activities their children attend, some researcher support the Channeling hypothesis which suggests that parents tend to “channel” their children into environments (schools, activities, parishes) that will reinforce the beliefs and values taught and valued at home as the parent’s direct influence wanes with age (Hoge ,1992). There is evidence to support the channeling of Catholic-raised youth into certain environments within this study. However, given the emphasis of parents throughout participant narratives, this study does not support the full Channeling hypothesis which states parental direct influence wanes and acts instead as a mediating factor as the youth ages.

The most common mentioned influential adult type for Currently-Catholic participants were parish adults, for Previously-Catholic it was family adults. This suggests that Currently-Catholic participants may have been exposed to more Catholic adults outside their family than Previously-Catholic participants. Participants’ exposure to adults outside of the family was likely guided by their guardians (i.e., parents and grandparents) who helped shape and maintain their activities. If parents are connecting participants to their parish through Catechism classes, youth group, regularly attending Mass and parish functions, participants are exposed to a wider variety of Catholic adults outside their family. This provides a wider selection of adults with which Catholic-raised participants can interact and connect.

In the parish setting, Currently-Catholic and Previously-Catholic participants reported similar numbers of catechism teachers, clergy, and nuns. Where the two groups differed was regarding the number of parish ministry staff

mentioned. Only one Previously-Catholic participant mentioned being influenced by a parish ministry staff member, whereas eight Currently-Catholic participants mentioned parish ministry staff members. Similarly, only one Previously-Catholic participant listed a religious-event adult during their interview while religious-event adults were discussed by seven Currently-Catholic participants. Parish ministry staff (youth group leaders and choir leaders) and religious-event adults (retreats and service/mission trips) suggest a deeper level of involvement within the parish beyond exposure to Catechism staff.

It can be concluded that all participants, given all participants were Confirmed, received at least two years of Catechism (one leading up to the First Holy Communion and another before Confirmation). As such, participants must be exposed to at least two Catechism staff for them to receive the sacraments. This suggests that Previously-Catholic participants may not be interacting with as many Catholic adults at the parish outside of Mass and Catechism whereas Currently-Catholic participants may have been taking part in parish activities such as youth group, retreats, and service events. It is possible the Catholic-raised participants without these additional adult exposures attended parishes where these activities were not offered. It is also possible this type of involvement (youth groups and retreats) were offered but not prioritized by the guardians.

### **The Impact of Experiences with Adult Religious, Retreats, and the Parish Community**

Few participants discussed forming close, long-term, or influential relationships with Catholic priests, deacons, or nuns. Most of the exposure

participants received to priests and deacons was at Mass and a handful mentioned interactions with priests in the confessional. These surface level and short-term interactions were often described as a quick hello before or after Mass, describing the quality of a homily or describing the priest as either kind and non-judgmental in the confessional, or as out of touch and demeaning. However, those who bonded with priests found these relationships to be extremely supportive and fruitful in their religious identity formation. They were described as good listeners who helped participants explore their religious identity instead of just giving them the answers, intelligent, and having engaging personalities that encouraged the participant to interact with them.

Priests, deacons, brothers and nuns—adults outwardly extremely devoted to their religion—act as models of what a Catholic life can look like. Their visible vocation, often considered a radical act in today’s modern age, can act as a jumping off point to discuss how religion can fit into modern life or it can be a wall that discourages contact. This wall may be because the adult is “othered” either in their own eyes or the eyes of the participant. Because they are “other,” the participant cannot relate to or learn from the adult’s experiences. Therefore, finding ways to connect Catholic-raised youth to Catholic religious outside of Mass may be an influential and impactful aspect of ministry within a parish or a Catholic school setting.

Relatedly, negative characteristics and behaviors were used to describe a portion of all adult categories except religious-event adults. For those that attended retreats and mission/service trips and events, the stories provided were

overwhelmingly positive experiences of religious growth, acceptance, and Catholic fellowship. This may have been because those who attended retreats already knew the leaders and therefore self-selected into a program with adults they already liked and trusted. It also may mean that those who mentioned retreats (those who were Currently-Catholic) focused on experiences and retreats that supported their rationale for being Currently-Catholic and did not mention bad or lack luster retreats. It is also possible Previously-Catholic participants attended ineffective or lack luster retreats that they deemed unnecessary to discuss or forgot to discuss. However, a lack of mention, even if the events took place, suggests a lower level of influence on the participant because they did not mention it.

It is also important to note that while it was true that adults, such as retreat leaders and missionaries, could make a considerable impact on a Catholic-raised youth, the majority of positively described adults tended to interact with participants over an extended period. Inversely, just because an adult, such as a grandparent or parish priest has opportunities to interact with the participant over a longer period, usually years, this does not mean bonds will necessarily form if the interactions are rare or unpleasant.

The presence of large communities as an adult type speaks to the potential role that adults, who have never spoken to the participant, may play in forming the next generation's views on religion with their Mass behavior. For example, one participant witnessed the parish worshipping and described it as beautiful acts of devotion. Another participant saw the parish community at Mass and viewed

their slack-faced robotic responses as creepy. These unintentionally influential adults were going about their own business, most likely oblivious to the participant's gaze, yet the adult influenced the participant's views on religion.

### **Talk to Me, Not Down to Me: Pre-university and University Adults**

A lack of respect has been shown in the literature to have a hindering effect on youths' ability to forming bonds with staff in after school programs (Deutsch & Jones, 2008; Ito et al., 2013). While some youth within the study reported respecting staff because they were in positions of authority, other youth reported that they respect adults because adults respect them. This bidirectional respect allowed staff to form close relationships with youth (Deutsch & Jones, 2008).

When discussing school adults such as religion teachers or non-religion teachers at Catholic schools, participants within the current study often felt these adults talked down to them or juvenilized Catholic teachings. This talking down to, and not presenting religion to youth as equals or adults was not present among university adults. In part, university students are adults and will likely be treated differently than high school or middle school students. However, it is important to note that participants did feel a lack of respect from adults who gave them a child-version of God instead of giving a fuller version they felt they deserved and could handle. This lack of respect, in the eyes of the participants, hurt the adult's ability to engage with and teach participants. By failing to foster a respectful environment these adults hurt their own chances of being seen as credible advocates for the religion they represented; Catholicism.

Pre-university teachers were also more likely to be described as picking favorites and focusing on, ranting about, or discipline students' purity and modesty. There were stories of high school teachers actively treating "immodestly" dressed students as deviant compared to their modestly dressed counterparts. In addition, there was a story of a male teacher ranting in class about the morality of teenage girls. Only one participant told a singular story about a high school teacher encouraging female students to respect and accept their bodies, the bodies God gave them, as gifts not as objects that led boys to sin. This morality shaming was not present in any of the narratives once participants entered college. However, as the Catholic retention statistics suggest, these extremely negative experiences with Catholic adults in a Catholic school are happening during the time Catholic youth are making decisions on whether to remain affiliated with the Catholic Church later in life (Manhlos-Weber & Smith, 2018; McCarty & Vitek, 2018; Pew Research Group, 2009; Lipka, 2015). By the time they reach respectful and "adult-level" religious education in college, young adults may have already disaffiliated.

In addition to speaking fondly of professors, most participants spoke fondly and appreciatively of the adults they had interacted with in college related to the Catholic religion as well as other religious traditions. These interactions happened through on campus jobs, seeking religious ministry services on campus, and in the classroom. Negative interactions with adults regarding religion in college almost exclusively came from family members with whom participants were currently living or who regularly called to check to see if they were still



going to Mass. These overwhelmingly pleasant experiences in college are likely due to the participant's ability to choose within which communities they wish to live, learn, work, and relax now that they are in more control of their schedule.

Participants were required to take two classes in religious studies. Those who wished to delve into Catholic history or explore the religion in a modern or new lens, searched out those opportunities. Those who wished to avoid a Catholic-centric class were able to do that as well with general classes on World Religions as well as non-Catholic religion specific classes. In addition, participants who wished to find Catholic community in university through Campus ministry found it. Those who did not wish to entertain that part of their upbringing in college were not left wanting for activities and fellowship, religious or otherwise, to keep them busy and fulfilled.

### **God-Parents/Confirmation Sponsors**

Interestingly, only five participants discussed their Godparents or Confirmation sponsors. This is troubling from a ministerial standpoint as all 24 participants were baptized and confirmed. Therefore, they all had two to three non-parental adults whom had made promises at the time of the participant's baptism and confirmation to help in the Catholic rearing of the participant and to support and mentor them as they grow. However, only three of the participants mentioned their Godparents as actively supporting their religious identity or having ever discussed religion with them. For the other two participants who mentioned Godparents, when asked specifically if they had ever discussed Catholicism with the participant, participants responded their Godparent was not

frequently involved in their life or if they were, the participant could not remember having ever discussed religion with their Godparent(s) or Confirmation sponsor. As the Godparent and Confirmation sponsor are adults stepping up to formalize their commitment to the Catholic education and religious formation of Catholic youth, they should arguably be those in the trenches with Catholic youth as they learn, struggle, and grow in their Catholic identity, yet they are noticeably missing across both groupings.

### **What Youth Want Out of Secular and Religious Supportive Adults**

All characteristic and behavior themes reported in this study arose organically from the open coding process. However, there are striking similarities between themes in this study and those within previous supportive adult literature done in secular settings.

To be able to make an informed decision to identify as Catholic, a Catholic-raised youth must be provided with sufficient knowledge about what the Church believes and what the Church practices. Without this knowledge participants are making decisions with incomplete information. One-fifth of participants felt they had not had enough education or were unsure if they had had enough education to decide on their Catholic identity. Five of the seven participants were Previously-Catholic and two were Currently-Catholic. When deciding to identify or not identify as Catholic, it would make sense to find and interact with adults who are able as well as willing to teach. The behavior of “teacher,” an adult who imparts their knowledge to youth, is an important and common characteristic/behavior within mentoring and supportive adult literature

(Karcher & Hansen 2014; Nakkula & Harris, 2014). These adults do not just include professional paid teachers but any adult imparting knowledge to the youth such as a parent, coach, after school program leader, a family friend, a boss, etc. Youth and young adults look to the adults around them to learn about their environment and how to live in the world. Similarly, within the current study, teaching behaviors such as *taught about the Catholic religion* and *taught incorrect religious information* were discussed as positive and negative behaviors in relation to all adult groups. Similarly, participants valued *intelligence (logical and smart)* over *lack of knowledge* when discussing adults.

The knowledge needed to make an informed decision, does not only come through learning facts in a classroom or church setting, but also in “seeing” what a Catholic “looks like” and “acts like.” Within this study, “modeling a Catholic lifestyle” was comparable to the mentoring theme of “exemplars of adult behavior” (Hurd et al., 2014) and “role models” (Vaclavik, Sanchez, Buehler, Gray & Rodriguez, 2017). An inspiring role model (Vaclavik et al., 2017) shows a positive and exciting example of what a life or profession may look like such as an artist living out their dream or an adult from a low-income background rising to be the head of a company. For Catholic-raised youth, seeing a person claim the identity of Catholic not only in their words but their actions; attending Mass, praying, and practicing Catholic morals is important. Though perhaps even more important is the attitude with which they live out their religion or occupation. No one wants to live a boring or unhappy life. Adults who model a certain lifestyle are most likely to be mirrored or have youth follow their example, if the life they

portray is desirable or inspiring. Adults who are *openly-flawed/imperfect* yet project joy and are *caring/loving* are going to be more attractive models to Catholic-raised youth than those who are *cold/closed off or disapproving/judgmental* or *hypocritical*.

Inversely, seeing *Nominal Catholic* or *Hypocritical* adults claim to be Catholic while their behavior says otherwise also provides an example but not one to whom the participant can look up to. Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith (1982) and Dudley (1986) found “parental consistency” was an important component in the transition of religious identity from one generation to the next. When a Catholic adult requires religious education and Mass attendance for their child but is seen in other aspects of their life or in their rationale for being Catholic to be phoning it in or flip flopping, this could be seen as inconsistency. In addition, when a Catholic adult claims to be a moral authority because of their religious identity or age yet act in an unethical or inappropriate way such as gossiping, stealing, or verbally demeaning a youth, a teenager or young adult is going to connect that behavior with the identity of that adult and possibly disengage from both.

The desire to disengage with negative and immoral adults found in this study, was also found in a study by Nuesch-Olver (2005) on faith narratives. Students who wrote narratives that included parish scandals or immoral or illegal acts by pastors, or other religious adults in power, such as youth group leaders, often fell away from their childhood religion (Nuesch-Olver, 2005). One example provided by Nuesch-Olver, (2005) was of a student whose youth group leader was fired for having an inappropriate relationship with a teenager at the church. After

this news came out, the student had a hard time trusting God and their religious community. Similarly, within this study, one participant discussed the blow of finding out her favorite priest had been stealing money from her parish. This revelation acted as a catalyst to her discovering other ways priests had failed at other parishes such as the sex abuse scandals. These discoveries led her to take a serious look at where she was placing her trust. This disengagement and lack of trust after witnessing unethical or inappropriate behavior is also seen in non-religious adult-youth interactions with coaches, teachers, and other adults (Dworkin & Larson, 2006). This behavior may take the form of being mean to teens, stealing, or playing favorites. Playing favorites was reported by participants within the current study when discussing Catechism and school teachers. For example, one participant explained how the nuns who taught at her school overtly favored the female students they thought were virgins and held those they believed were sexually active at arm's length. Another participant described their male teacher ranting in class about how girls were immoral.

One large role adults play in the lives of teenagers is as a “connector,” linking youth to people, institutions and opportunities that may help them achieve their goals and grow (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Vaclavik et al, 2017). “Connectors” may connect youth to other adults to increase the youth’s network or may connect them to the connections necessary to get a new job, internship or get into college. This may take the form of helping students apply to college by helping them fill out forms, writing recommendation letters or arranging meetings with alumni of a university to learn more about its programs (Vaclavik et al., 2017). This study

and the Dowling et al., (2004) study suggest that connections are important in religious settings as well. Connections to a religious community have been shown to be associated with higher levels of religiosity (Dowling et al., 2004). Within the Dowling et al., (2004) study, youth who had more connections to their religious community reported higher levels of religiosity and spirituality than those who only attended religious services and read the Bible. The positive and negative behavior themes within this study *connecting youth to Catholic people and experiences* shows this role was important and present within the lives of Catholic-raised youth. Catholic adults encouraged participants to sign up for retreats, leadership opportunities, join youth group, or build additional connections to other Catholic adults such as priests. Inversely, if adults refused to help make connections, these bonds were harder to make. For example, in the current study, one participant described her parish not allowing her to be an altar server because she was a girl as well as barring her from being a lector because she was too young. She was able to make connections elsewhere but these rejections by her Catholic parish remained salient almost a decade later.

Connector adults in this study also acted as “challengers” (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2012). Challengers do just that, challenge youth to explore alternative viewpoints counter to their current narrative in a class or in a one-on-one discussion. Challengers may push a participant to apply for a competition they did not have the confidence to enter alone or train that much harder for a big game. Connecting youth to Catholic experiences may also involve challenging them to explore new ways of being Catholics. This challenging can force

participants out of their comfort zone by reengaging with Confession after a bad experience or trying Adoration for the first time at a retreat. One participant also discussed how a retreat leader challenged her to stop thinking about God and Catholicism as a brick and mortar institution that could only happen in a church at Mass, but instead as something that could affect her daily life and could be present anywhere she was.

This study provides examples of how supportive adult and mentoring themes may manifest within a Catholic religious setting. The similarities within this study to supportive adult literature suggest certain needs and dynamics may remain stable when interacting with adults regardless of the setting. While promising preliminary findings, further research is needed to explore the applicability of supportive adult literature themes and findings in religious settings within Catholic and other religious communities.

### **Supporting Those Who Support Catholic-Raised Youth**

The “Lost Generation” refers to the generation of youth raised directly after Vatican II when ministry standards, content, and means of providing said ministry were in flux (Smith et al., 2014). The adults raising this study’s participants are likely in the same age range as this Lost Generation. Smith et al. (2014) and Paradis et al. (1975) suggests many in this group, today’s Boomer generation or those raised by the Boomer generation, were likely provided with less than sufficient catechism and ministry to put them in a position where they can confidently support and educate modern Catholic-raised youth.

Negative behavior themes provided by both currently and Previously-Catholic participants may support the Lost Generation categorization. Regarding having discussions about religion, negative discussion behaviors were often characterized by negatively reacting to questions about religion or what it means to be Catholic. If a parent or other adult feels under educated on a topic being discussed, they may lash out or provide the extremely common response of “because I said so” or “because the Church says so” or “because we are Catholic.” These answers may not be given because of a lack of desire to discuss religion with the participant but because of a lack of confidence to their own ability to answer a question. While the adult’s intent in ending the conversation may not be because of a lack of desire to be “present for the youth,” youth and young adults are in a self-conscious stage of life and may easily interpret this as the adult not showing proper interest in the relationship. As Futch Ehrlich and colleagues (2016) found, if youth thinks an adult is not interested in them or forming a relationship, they are less likely to try to reengage that adult in the future. In the case of religious discussions, if an adult shows disinterest in a religious conversation or religion in general, this disinterest will likely lead to youth asking less questions in the future or outright disengagement from the adult and by connection, the religion the adult represented.

A lack of knowledge or discomfort discussing religion is also seen in the theme of “teaching incorrect Catholic information.” Two areas of incorrect information taught by adults that participants found upsetting were “presenting prayer as a fix-all” and “presenting science and religion as incompatible.” The



incompatibility of religion and science is a fallacy often cited by former Catholics as part of or their main rationale for disaffiliating from the Catholic Church (Manglos-Weber & Smith, 2018, Pew Research Group, 2016). This was seen in the “dissenter” category found in the Manglos-Weber and Smith (2018) study on former Catholics and why they disaffiliate. The importance of science and acting rationally was also reported in a Pew 2016 study as the most common reason for disaffiliating from a religious identity. Helping adults learn more about what prayer is and is not and about the ways science and religion are compatible may help them pass this knowledge on and not seem “out of touch” with the modern world when teaching religion to the next generation.

In this study, positive behaviors were evenly split amongst family, parish, and school adults, whereas negative behaviors were notably and almost exclusively described in relation to family adults. Thus, interventions with adults, especially family adults are of the utmost importance given that family adults were the number one perpetrators of negative behaviors. This support may take the form of providing adults in these positions as well as parents with additional dogmatic training or refresher courses to increase their knowledge, correct any incorrect knowledge, and help them become more comfortable when approached by youth with difficult (yet reasonable) questions. For parents, this may be accomplished with Catechism classes which parents attend at the same time their child is in class or homework assignments that incorporate parental participation. If this post-Vatican II generation truly is a “weakened” or “broken” link in the Catholic chain (Smith et al., 2014), supporting the current generation of Catholic-

raised youth also means supporting and ministering to previous generations of Catholic-raised youth to repair and strengthen their knowledge and connection to the Catholic religious tradition.

### **Comparing Adults Mentioned by Currently-Catholic and Previously-Catholic Participants**

Research focusing on the religiosity of young adults often describes a lack of religious adults in the lives of the participants as an explanation for low religiosity or leaving a religious group (Dowling et al., 2004; Furrow & Wagener, 2004; Lanker & Issler, 2010; Smith & Snell, 2009). It would be easy if the solution was as simple as adding more adults. However, this study provides a slightly different narrative than previous research.

For example, there was no difference in the number of adults mentioned by participants in the two groupings. Nor did the Currently-Catholic participants mention more Catholic adults than their Previously-Catholic counterparts. Even regarding adults exhibiting positive behaviors themes, except for the discussion theme, there was no significant difference in the median number of adults reported by Currently and Previously-Catholic participants. The two groups reported similar median numbers of adults providing support of their identity, teaching them about Catholicism, modeling a Catholic lifestyle, respecting other religions, and making connections to Catholic experience and people.

Where the two religious groups differed was in the presence of adults performing negative behaviors in their narratives. For example, adults providing conditional support, responding negatively to questions about religion, modeling a

non-Catholic lifestyle, and providing negative connections to Catholic activities. This suggests that it is not necessarily necessary to find ways to connect Catholic-raised participants to more positive Catholic adults but instead find ways to somehow minimize Catholic-raised youths' exposure to negative adults or negate the influence of these negative exposures.

These findings support the findings of Rook (1999) and Rhodes and colleagues (2005) who suggest that negative encounters with adults, even if less numerous than positive encounters will remain more salient because of their negative nature. Thus a few negative encounters can overpower a larger number of positive encounters. This suggests participants may not be disaffiliating because they disagree with Catholicism at its best, but that they may be turned off by the hypocrisy and lackluster nature of incorrectly practiced Catholicism. Previously-Catholic participants are seeing the same number of positive examples of religion and Catholicism from the adults in their social circles but the presence of adults exhibiting negative behaviors may be drowning out the positive influences in a way not present in the narratives of Currently-Catholic participants.

In addition to the suggestions above regarding correcting incorrect knowledge related to prayer as a fix-all and the incompatibility of science and religion, another negative behavior that may be addressed is the difference between providing connections to religious experiences and providing negative connections to religious experiences. Taking children to Mass and sending them to Catechism classes is by no means a negative behavior, but the way adults made

these connections could make participants hate the experience instead of learning the beauty of them. While taking children to Mass on Sundays is a Catholic parent's responsibility, arguments about going only made participants dread Sundays instead of teaching them the importance of and beauty of the Mass. Flipping the conversation to present Mass not as a boring "Sunday Obligation" one must get through but instead teaching the beauty and possibilities attending Mass allows could make a difference. This may be done by parents when discussing Mass within the family as well as by teachers and Catechism teachers in the classroom. From the parish's standpoint, finding ways to include youth in the Mass would also be ideal ways of preventing negative connections to Catholic experiences. For example, encouraging both female and male parishioners to be altar servers, encouraging teenager and young adults to be readers, and forming a church choir that is for teenagers or inclusive of teenagers. These are all ways to create positive rather than negative connections to the Liturgy, priests and deacons, and the parish community.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations to this study that must be addressed. First, this exploratory study consisted of 24 Catholic-raised college students at a singular urban Midwest university. As such, the findings may not be generalizable to all Catholic-raised youth and young adults in the United States. Second, students who participated in the study were self-selected. While every effort was made to gather a racial, sexuality, and gender diverse sample within the campus population, it is possible that those who volunteered to participate in the study,

and therefore were willing to discuss their experience growing up Catholic in-depth with a researcher, may be different than those who were not willing to participate.

Finally, as this is a cross-sectional and not longitudinal study, the study is reliant on the recall of the participant and their willingness to disclose potentially embarrassing, uncomfortable, or deeply personal experiences. As such, a third limitation, must also be considered when interpreting and utilizing findings from this study. It is possible that participants who identified as Currently-Catholic at the time of the interview focused on adults and experiences that fit their narrative of remaining Catholic and glossed over or forgot to mention adults that may have had negative influences or with whom they had negative encounters. Inversely, Previously-Catholics may have focused more on negative adults and adult behaviors that supported their current religious identity and the decision to disaffiliate with the Catholic Church.

### **Future Directions**

This study was an exploratory study identifying and describing the influential adults present during the religious identity formation of Catholic-raised youth. Future studies, now that a list of adult types has been identified, may ask participants to discuss one or more of these adult types in more detail. For example, an exploration into the role of Catholic Godparent and Confirmation sponsor is much needed. These studies may examine the selection process of these influential adults by Catholic parents and Catholic middle school students and how that relationship progresses. A study on Godparents and Confirmation

sponsors may provide ways to support that relationship through institutional means.

Future studies should also ask participants to identify peers and interpersonal influences such as books, movies, and the internet, which were briefly mentioned by a handful of Previously-Catholic participants. As social media and the internet become larger parts of the educational and social experience of youth and young adults, in-person interactions with adults or peers are no longer the only way youth learn about and interact with religion. Opening questioning to include non-adult influences may prove useful in fostering online ministries and keying in on areas youth are too embarrassed to ask about with an adult face-to-face. Knowing what youth are learning about on YouTube or through internet searches can guide teachers and parents toward topics to approach youth about that they may not be willing to bring up with an adult on their own.

While comparisons between the adult types, characteristics, and behaviors between the two religious groups can be made, this study cannot make causal claims. Future studies may benefit from asking participants to rank the importance of adults and interactions or speculate on how an adult or event may have caused them to make a religious decision or lean toward or away from affiliating with the Catholic Church.

### **Implications**

Findings from this study have implications for engaging youth in their religious identity development. Catholic-raised youth first and foremost are

learning about what it means to be Catholic and why they should or should not be Catholic in the home. How parents discuss, live, and prioritize religion within the home speaks to the importance of providing additional support to parents in how to parent as a Catholic parent. Parish communities may benefit from finding ways of educating and supporting parents in how to be “Catholic” parents who are prepared to teach and model the religion they have vowed (at the child’s baptism) to raise them within. This may be as simply as providing opportunities for them to discuss and reflect on why they themselves are Catholic so the first time they think about the answer to this question is not when they are blindsided by their child. However, while religion starts in the home, it should not remain exclusively there. Currently-Catholic participants described more parish and religious-event adults than their Previously-Catholic counterparts. As discussed above, this suggests they may have been aided by their parents to make more connections to religious adults outside the home and extended family.

This study also shows the importance of frequent conversations. Catholic-raised children, teens and young adults are going to have questions. Religion is big, complex, and confusing. Catholicism is, in many ways, counter to modern culture so as Catholic-raised youth grow they are going to be receiving conflicting messages. How adults respond to a question raised by a youth is often going to either encourage or discourage future questions. When in doubt parents, teachers, priests, etc. should have the conversation even if they do not know all the right answers. It is better to say; “I am not sure, but I’ll find out for you” then to say; “because God said so” or “because the Church says so.” The first answer allows

the conversation to continue, encourages future questions, and models that it is okay to not know all the answers, while the later options shut down conversation. Religion should be an ongoing conversation with many adults throughout life not relegated to a classroom or church for an hour once a week. The role of exploration and experimentation are key in the identity formation process. Regardless of which status an individual is at, providing spaces that foster youth conversation that explore, discuss, and grapple with Catholic dogma, social, and moral teachings can provide opportunities for all aspects of identity formation in an organized and informational setting (Reilly et al., 2018).

Related to having an ongoing conversation, adults should not only realize that doubting and questioning is normal but encouraged. Raising a question or a doubt means this youth is actively engaging with religion not just tuning it out. Instead of tuning out in class or being disinterested at Mass or at home (indicative of the identity diffusion and foreclosure statuses of identity development; Marcia, 1966), youth who are questioning and actively grappling with religion and questions (indicative of the in-depth exploration or reconsideration statuses of identity development; Crocetti et al., 2008, Reilly et al., 2018) should be encouraged not discouraged. Teenagers having questions and doubt is part of the learning and exploration process. Instead of demonizing doubts as “anti-Catholic” adults should embrace them as tentative steps toward a deeper understanding of their religious identity and the Catholic Church.

This study also shows how averse and sensitive to hypocrisy Catholic-raised youth are when it comes to religion and how, maybe counterintuitively,



accepting youth are of self-proclaimed imperfect people. This was shown in the characteristics they used to describe adults as well as the behaviors they viewed favorably and unfavorably. If a teenager does not feel able to relate to an adult they are unlikely to trust or engage with them (Deutsch & Jones, 2008; Sirin, Ryce, & Mir, 2009). Adults who try to act perfect or too holy are of no interest to Catholic-raised adults. Instead, it is the vulnerable and openly imperfect adults that youth felt comfortable around, looked up to, and wanted to emulate. Teenagers know they themselves are not perfect, they do not have life figured out, so to look at the adults in their life and see others that admit to struggling, suffering, and being imperfect provides an opening to relate and learn.

Finally, these adults are not perfect, but they admit to being loved by a perfect God whom they want to share with the youth. These adults are not perfectly educated but they are open to admitting they still need to learn. Comparably, Eli was by no means a perfect teacher or follower of God. However, he was still able to point Samuel to God when the moment counted because he was there when Samuel had questions and they had a relationship built on countless previous conversations. Simply, the take away from this study is that adults do not have to be perfect to be an Eli for a Catholic-raised youth, but they do have to be open and willing.

### **Conclusion**

This study adds much needed detail to the limited literature pertaining to the adults present during the religious identity formation of Catholic-raised youth. As similarities were found between preexisting supportive adult themes and those

found in this study, this study also provides support for the applicability of the broad literature on supportive adults in religion-based adult-youth interactions. Beyond these connections and additions to the literature, there are four take away messages from this study worth mentioning; 1) religion starts in the home but should not be limited to the home, 2) Catholic-raised youth want to have conversations about religion and take their cues from the adults in their lives on whether this is appropriate or not, 3) adults should embrace the doubting stage of the Catholic identity formation process, and 4) an adult does not have to be perfect or a perfect Catholic to be an Eli to a Catholic-raised youth.

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### **Appendix A. Prescreening Questionnaire**

Potential participants filled out this questionnaire to determine if they meet the inclusion criteria for the study. Potential participants that meet the inclusion criteria were contacted by email or phone to set up an interview.

### Growing Up Catholic Pre-Screening Survey

This is a pre-screening survey for the “Growing Up Catholic” study. The study is recruiting students who were either 1) raised Catholic and currently identify as Catholic or 2) raised Catholic and no longer identify as Catholic. Please fill out the following demographic survey and contact information. If you meet the inclusion criteria, you will be contacted to schedule an in-person interview about your experience growing up Catholic and your current religious identity.

1. **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_
2. **Year in School:**    Freshman        Sophomore        Junior        Senior
3. **Current Religious Identity:**        Catholic        Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
4. **Were you raised in the Catholic Church?** Yes    No    Unsure
5. **Did you receive the Sacrament of Confirmation?** Yes    No    Unsure
6. **Are either or both of your parents/guardians Catholic?** Yes, both parents/guardians    Yes, one parent/guardian    No, neither parent/guardian is Catholic    Unsure
7. **Gender:** Male    Female    Transgender M to F    Transgender F to M    Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
8. **Sexual Orientation:** Bisexual    Heterosexual    Gay    Lesbian    Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
9. **Primary Race (check all that apply):**    African American        Asian        White  
Native American        Pacific Islander        Latina/o        Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

If you meet the inclusion criteria do you agree to be contacted to schedule a time to meet with the researcher to participate in a 1.5-hour interview?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I agree to be contacted about participating in an interview

First and Last Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I do not agree to be contacted about participating in an interview (If you do not want to be contacted you do not need to provide contact information)

## **Appendix B. Demographic Survey**

Participants filled out this demographic survey before they completed the narrative interview.



## Demographic Survey

1. **What is your gender?**

- Male     Female     Transgender M to F     Transgender F to M  
 Other

2. **What is your age?** \_\_\_\_\_

3. **What is your race/ethnicity? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)**

- African American/Black                       Latino(a) (Puerto Rican)  
 American Indian/Native American     Latino(a) (Mexican)  
 Asian/Pacific Islander                       Latino(a) (other – please specify  
\_\_\_\_\_)

(please specify ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_)  Other (please specify)

\_\_\_\_\_

- White/Caucasian

4. **Sexual Orientation:**

- Bisexual     Heterosexual     Gay     Lesbian     Other (please  
specify)\_\_\_\_\_

5. **What school do you attend?**

- DePaul University     Loyola University

6. **What year are you in?**

- Freshman     Sophomore     Junior     Senior

7. **What is your current religious Identity?**

\_\_\_\_\_

8. **How many years have you identified as this religion? -**

\_\_\_\_\_

9. **Were you raised in the Catholic Church?**

- Yes     No     Unsure

10. **How would you rate your experience being raised Catholic?**

- Very Unsatisfied     Unsatisfied     Neutral     Satisfied

Very Satisfied

**11. Did you receive the Sacrament of Confirmation?**

Yes     No     Unsure

**12. Are either or both of your parents/guardians Catholic?**

Yes, both parents/guardians are Catholic     No, neither parent/guardian is Catholic

Yes, one parent/guardian is Catholic     Unsure

**13. How often did/do your parents/guardians practice their Catholic faith in front of you?**

Very Rarely     Rarely     Sometimes     Often

Very Often

**14. Growing up did you have at least one non-parental/guardian adult who you could look to or ask for guidance about Catholicism?**

Yes     No     Unsure

**15. If yes, how often did this adult practice their Catholic faith in front of you?**

Very Rarely     Rarely     Sometimes     Often

Very Often

**16. How does this person support you in your faith?**

**17. Do you feel you were given enough Catholic education to make an informed decision about your faith?**

Yes     No     Unsure

**Explain your answer:**

### **Appendix C. Interview Protocol**

This script was used during participant interviews to guide questioning and to provide a place for the interviewer to take notes.

## **Narrative Interview Script for the Growing Up Catholic Study**

### **INTRODUCTION TO STUDY:**

Hello my name is (Interviewer Name). Thank you very much for being willing to help me with my research.

The goal of this interview is to find out more about your experience growing up Catholic, specifically, individuals you feel greatly influenced your experience growing up Catholic and how the process of being raised Catholic helped determine your current faith identity.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. The interview should last about 1.5 hours. While none of the questions in the interview are meant to be intrusive or upsetting, your faith journey may be a very personal aspect of your identity so some questions may bring up sensitive topics that might make you uncomfortable or even upset. You can stop the interview at any time and you can choose to not answer any of the questions.

As you can see, I have an audio recorder. I want to use it to make sure that I remember and understand all the information you give me. The information you provide will be kept confidential and only used for this study. The audio recording will include your first name only and the transcribed version will replace your name with an anonymous identifier (e.g., Participant #1). No one outside the research staff will be allowed to listen to the files and they will be destroyed at the end of the study. Any information you provide will be combined with the responses of the other students I am talking with and summarized. Your name will not appear in any reports from the study.

### **CONSENT FORM:**

Before we begin, I need to go over this consent form with you. It gives you more information about the study and a telephone number you can call if you have questions later. I will give you a copy to keep.

### **DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

To start I have a quick survey for you to fill out. This will collect some demographic information from you. Some of these are similar to the questions you filled out on the prescreening survey as well as some additional ones about your family. When you complete the survey we will move on to the interview.

**[ADMINISTER DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY]**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEW:**

You will see that I have a list of questions to follow for this interview. This list is to help me remember all the important questions to ask you. I will likely make notes time to time, this is to remind myself of important points such

as names or events or to make sure I ask you about something later.

The interview is divided into 3 parts. First, we are going to talk about your current faith identity, how you practice your belief system and what those beliefs mean to you. Second, I will ask you to recount your experience being raised Catholic from childhood up through today. During this section, I will refrain from asking too many questions so as not to lead your story in one direction or another. Your narrative will be over once you have reached your current age and explained how you settled on or are still struggling with your current faith identity. The final section will be more structured. I will ask follow up questions about your narrative as well as some other more specific questions. This conversation will be recorded for research purposes. Please let me know now if you do not agree to being recorded. You may request that the recording stop at any time. **[START RECORDER]**

### **Section 1: Current Faith Identity**

First, we are going to talk about your current faith identity, how you practice your faith and what those beliefs mean to you.

1. To start please state your current faith identity in your own words.
2. What does it mean to you to be a \_\_\_\_\_?
3. What does being a \_\_\_\_\_ look like for you in a typical day or week?
4. How important is being a \_\_\_\_\_ to your identity or self-concept?

*“Thank you for sharing with me about your faith identity. Before we move on to talk about your experience growing up Catholic, is there anything else you would like to tell me about your faith identity that we haven’t covered already?”*

### **Section 2: Faith Narrative**

For this part of the interview, I want you to recount your experience being raised Catholic. While I do not want to guide your answers, some things you may cover are: how faith was discussed within your family growing up, attending mass and other religious events, any religious education you may have received, how your feelings toward Catholicism and other religions have changed over time, how coming to university influenced your faith life and any major events or people that have influenced your faith. During this section, I will refrain from asking a lot of questions so as not to lead your story in one direction or another. To help guide you and keep yourself on track in your story you may use this timeline. **[Give timeline to participant]** As you can see it is divided into before elementary, elementary, middle, high school and college. Some of these time-periods may have been more influential than others, so do not feel like you need to spend equal time on each time-period. I would like you to pay special attention to the “characters” in your story such as your parents and other adults who may

have influenced your faith journey either positively or negatively and specifically what they did to have this impact. Your narrative will be over once you have reached your current age and explained how you settled on or are still struggling with your current faith identity.

*“Thank you for sharing with me about your experience being raised Catholic. Before we move on, is there anything else you would like to add to your faith narrative?”*

### **Section 3: Research Questions**

*“Now, I am going to ask you some follow up questions about your story as well as ask questions pertaining specifically to the adults in your life. As in the previous section, I am interested in the adults you feel had positive and/or negative influences on your faith journey. Some of the questions may cover information you have already shared. If you feel you have nothing else to add on a question you may say you have nothing else to add.”*

1. What was your parents’ role in teaching you about faith?
  - a. How often (if at all) did they pray in the home in front of you?
  - b. Did they agree with each other on faiths matters or disagree?
  - c. How often (if at all) did you talk to your parents about faith?
  - d. Do you feel that your parents were supportive of your faith choices?
    - i. If yes, how were they supportive? If no, how weren’t they supportive?
2. You mentioned [adult name] when you were talking earlier. Can you go more into detail about how they influenced your faith journey? *[repeat to cover all the adults]*
  - a. What was this adult’s relationship to you?
  - b. What was their role in teaching you about faith?
  - c. What specifically did they do to have an influence on you?
  - d. Can you describe a memorable experience with this person related to your faith development?
    - i. What about the person made this experience stand out to you?
3. Are there any other adults who you feel it would be important to mention that positively influenced your faith journey?
  - a. What was this adult’s relationship to you?
  - b. What was their role in teaching you about faith?
  - c. What specifically did they do to have an influence on you?
  - d. Can you describe a memorable experience with this person related to your faith development?
    - i. What about the person made this experience stand out to you?
4. We have talked about how adults have positively influenced your faith journey. Have there been any adults that negatively influenced your faith journey?
  - a. What was this adult’s relationship to you?
  - b. What was their role in teaching you about faith?

- c. Why were they a negative influence?
- d. Can you describe a memorable experience you had with this person as it related to your faith development?
  - i. What about the person made this experience stand out to you?

*“That was the last question I have for you today. Thank you so much for sitting to talk with me about your faith experience. I know that some of these questions may have been difficult for you to answer, and I appreciate your time. Is there anything that you would like to add about any of the things we have discussed today?”*

**--INTERVIEW COMPLETE--**

### **Appendix D. Narrative Timeline**

This handout was provided to participants during the interview process to help participants structure their faith narratives chronologically and aid in the identification and discussion of adults and experiences ranging throughout the lifetime instead of only in the recent past.





