



The Impact of Religious Switching and Secularization on the Estimated Size of the U.S. Adult Catholic Population¹

Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University

How many Catholics have left the faith? In February 2008, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life released results from their “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” partially addressing this important question. Pew’s report for this study and many of the media stories² that followed it highlighted the following statements regarding the U.S. adult Catholic population:

“Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses as a result of affiliation changes. While nearly one-in-three Americans (31%) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four (24%) describe themselves as Catholic. These losses would have been even more pronounced were it not for the offsetting impact of immigration” (p. 6).

“...the Catholic share of the U.S. adult population has held fairly steady in recent decades, at around 25%. What this apparent stability obscures, however, is the large number of people who have left the Catholic Church. Approximately one-third of the survey respondents who say they were raised Catholic no longer describe themselves as Catholic. This means that roughly 10% of all Americans are former Catholics. These losses, however, have been partly offset by the number of people who have changed their affiliation to Catholicism (2.6% of the adult population) but more importantly by the disproportionately high number of Catholics among immigrants to the U.S.” (p. 7).

The Catholic Church has indeed lost the most in terms of total population but it is important to remember that the Catholic Church is also the single largest faith in the United States and proportions matter. In the discussion of those who leave their faith, the Pew study did not highlight some important results in their “Summary of Key Findings” regarding the varying *likelihoods*, by denomination, that one will leave the faith they were raised in. As bad as the Catholic losses are, they would have been even worse if the Church was losing its young faithful at the same *rate* as every other U.S. Protestant denomination.

Retention rates are reported by Pew in two separate tables in the report. The first is on pages 30, including Catholics, and the other is on page 31, including Protestant denominations.³ The table on the following page combines these Pew results and ranks retention rates for all faith groups that account for at least million adult members. The Pew study indicates that the Catholic Church has retained 68 percent of those who grew up Catholic.

¹ For questions or comments about this document contact Mark M. Gray, Director CARA Catholic Polls (CCP), at 202-687-0885 or mmg34@georgetown.edu.

² For example: *The Washington Times* story was titled, “Catholic tradition fading in U.S”, the *Chicago Tribune* went with “Many US Catholics, Protestants leave their churches”, and the *Orlando Sentinel* highlighted “Study: Immigrants keeping American Catholic Church afloat.”

³ The only retention rates reported in the summary of key findings were for the “unaffiliated population” and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

By comparison, 60 percent of those raised Baptist are still Baptists as adults and the retention rates are lower for Lutherans (59 percent), Methodists and Pentecostals (both 47 percent), Episcopalians (45 percent), and Presbyterians (40 percent). Of all the faith groups in the United States that have at least 3 million adult members, only those who were raised Jewish or Mormon are more likely than Catholics to keep their faith as adults (76 and 70 percent, respectively). Among smaller faith groups—with less than 3 million U.S. adult members—those who were raised as Hindu or Orthodox also have higher retention rates than those raised Catholic (84 and 73 percent, respectively).

**Keeping the Faith: Percentages of U.S. Adults
Staying With the Religion They Were Raised In**

Among faith groups with an estimated 3 million or more adult members

	Retention	Childhood Religion	Adults Leaving	Adults Staying
1. Jewish	76%	1.9%	-0.5%	1.4%
2. Mormon	70	1.8	-0.5	1.3
3. Catholic	68	31.4	-10.1	21.3
4. Baptist	60	20.9	-8.3	12.6
5. Lutheran	59	5.5	-2.3	3.2
6. Methodist	47	8.3	-4.4	3.9
7. Pentecostal	47	3.9	-2.0	1.9
8. Restorationist	46	2.3	-1.2	1.1
9. Anglican/Episcopal	45	1.8	-1.0	0.8
10. Presbyterian	40	3.1	-2.0	1.1
11. Protestant, nondenominational	44	1.5	-0.8	0.7
12. Protestant, nonspecific	Not reported	3.4	-2.1	1.3

Source: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” (pgs. 26, 30, and 31). Retention rates based on respondents who reported staying with their childhood faith.

It is the case that more “Protestants stay Protestant” (80 percent) overall, but this statistic lacks some meaning when one is actually measuring religious switching and only serves to mask the large volume of switching *between* Protestant denominations. The ease with which this occurs does not mean that this switching is somehow less relevant. For all they have in common, each denomination still has its own unique customs, rituals, traditions, and teachings. Switching from one to another brings change for the individual and the memberships of the Churches involved. Although the measurement of “Protestants staying Protestant” may have a sociological and historical meaning, this concept lacks similar relevance in the real world. Researchers may choose not to recognize a respondent’s change of faith group as a “real change” but this does not

mean the individuals making these responses—or the Churches losing or gaining their membership—share this interpretation.⁴ Also, if one accepts the notion that changing from one Protestant denomination to another is not a real change, the Pew report still indicates that 11 out of 100 adults in the United States were raised in any Protestant denomination and no longer identifies with any Protestant denomination today (p. 26). This formerly Protestant population is slightly *larger* than the one in ten former Catholics identified and highlighted by Pew. If one includes changes between Protestant denominations as real changes, *one in four* U.S. adults no longer self-identifies with the Protestant denomination in which they were raised. Pew researchers selectively use definitions to highlight that there are more former Catholics than any other faith (by comparing to each individual denomination) and that Protestant retention rates are better than those for Catholicism (by comparing to all denominations as a whole).

More serious, a methodological issue in Pew’s Religious Landscape Survey, which was not noted in the summary of key findings or in the press coverage of the results, leads to an underestimation in the size of the Catholic population as well as the Catholic Church’s retention rate. Pew researchers discuss this measurement issue over three pages in the body of the report (pgs. 41 to 43). The Religious Landscape Survey estimated a smaller proportion of Latinos self-identifying as Catholic compared to other surveys (*i.e.*, where Spanish or bilingual interviewing is used), including other recent Pew studies. The Pew authors note:

“The number of Latinos in the Landscape Survey who identify themselves as Catholic (58%) is considerably lower than in a major survey of Latinos the Forum conducted in 2006 with the Pew Hispanic Research Center, where more than two-thirds (68%) identified as Catholic” (p. 41).

Latinos in the Religious Landscape Survey disproportionately identified themselves as “unaffiliated.” The earlier 2006 Pew estimate of 68 percent Catholic affiliation among Latinos is consistent with CARA’s estimates reported in a meta-analysis of poll results that was recently published in a peer-reviewed academic journal.⁵ Out of concern for these results, Pew conducted a follow-up survey for comparison in January 2008. This new poll confirmed that the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey had indeed underestimated Latino Catholic affiliation. Although the Pew study included more than 35,000 interviews, resulting in a margin of sampling error of just ± 0.6 percentage points, sampling error is just one type of error that can affect surveys (others include measurement, non-response, non-coverage, and selection error). Pew notes that the underestimation may be related to these other sources of error possibly through the question wording, sampling, and the language options used.⁶ The Pew researchers conclude that:

“This means the Landscape Survey underestimates the proportion of Latinos who are Catholic. By extension, it may also slightly underestimate the proportion of the U.S.

⁴ This may be best reflected in the tendency for respondents to report a specific denomination name or family for their religious affiliation in open-ended questions rather than generically using the term Protestant.

⁵ “What Proportion of Adult Hispanics Are Catholic? A Review of Survey Data and Methodology” by Paul Perl, Jennifer Z. Greely, and Mark M. Gray in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45 (3): 419-436.

⁶ Some of these differences noted by Pew include the availability of bilingual interviewing and the inclusion of the following italicized text in the “Landscape Survey” question wording: “What is your present religion, *if any*, Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, *atheist, agnostic*, something else, or *nothing in particular*?”

Catholic population that is Latino and marginally underestimate the proportion of the U.S. population that is Catholic” (p. 43).

The Pew report does not provide estimates for the impact of this underestimation on the measurement of the U.S. adult Catholic population or for the number of those who have left the Catholic faith. This issue results to some degree in the underestimation of the Catholic population *and* the overestimation of the number of those who were raised Catholic but who now consider their religious affiliation to be “nothing in particular.”

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), the adult population in 2006 was approximately 221.6 million. If one conservatively estimates that 12 percent of these adults self-identifies as Latino or Hispanic and further only 58 percent of these Latinos self-identify as Catholic, as found in the Pew Religious Landscape Survey, then there are an estimated 15.4 million Latino adult Catholics in the United States.⁷ If one were to use the 68 percent estimate found in the 2006 survey by the Pew Hispanic Research Center, the estimated number of Latino adult Catholics in the U.S. is nearly 18.1 million. The difference between the 58 percent and 68 percent affiliation among adult Latinos is equivalent to 2.7 million U.S. adults (or 1.2 percent of the total U.S. adult population). To put it in Pew’s comparative terms, the 2.7 million adult Latino Catholics “missed” in the Religious Landscape Survey are equivalent to or larger than all but ten of the specific religious faith groups identified in the Pew study (it is also equivalent to 5 percent of Pew’s estimated size of the adult Catholic population).⁸

Pew researchers also widely note that immigration is an important factor in keeping the percentage of U.S. adults Catholics stable over time. What is not clear from the results reported is the proportion of foreign-born among those who were raised Catholic but who no longer consider themselves Catholic. As other Pew researchers have noted in a previous report, “Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion,” a measurable number of Latino Catholics (both foreign- and native-born) do switch faiths. There is no published estimate by Pew for the proportion of the -10.1 percent of the population that is formerly Catholic that is related to immigrants raised Catholic in a Latin American country, where the religious marketplace is not nearly as competitive, but who adopt a new faith upon immigrating to the United States.⁹ It is possible that immigration may not only be an important component in explaining the stability of the Catholic faith in the United States, but also in understanding its losses.

⁷ Census estimates for the Latino/Hispanic percentage of the total U.S. population, including children, are greater than 14 percent. Pew’s unweighted survey results indicate 9 percent of the U.S. adult population self-identifies as Catholic but after weighting this increases to 12.1 percent compared to the 12.4 percent in the U.S. adult population that is estimated to self identify as Latino/Hispanic.

⁸ See page 24 of the Pew report. These are: Catholic (23.9%), Baptist (17.2%), Methodist (6.2%), Lutheran (4.6%), Pentecostal (4.4%), Presbyterian (2.7%), Restorationist (2.1%), Mormon (1.7%), Jewish (1.7%), Episcopal/Anglican (1.5%). These exclude the more non-specific classifications that are larger than 1.5%: “Nondenominational” Protestants (4.5%), “Protestant, nonspecific (4.9%), as well as non-believer or questioner groups such as Atheists (1.6%), and Agnostics (2.4%).

⁹ CARA inquired about these results after the release of the Pew report. An emailed response on April 22, 2008 to CARA from Luis Lugo, Director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, indicated the following “Immigrants are included in our estimates of religious change. We do find that immigrants who were raised Catholic are somewhat more likely to still be Catholic as compared to native-born adults who were raised Catholic, though the differences are not huge.”

In many regards, most of Pew’s Catholic results are consistent with recent findings of CARA’s national random-sample telephone polls.¹⁰ For example, in the 2003 CARA Catholic Poll (CCP), 22.9 percent of the U.S adult population self-identified as Catholic (compared to 23.9 percent in the Pew study). CARA estimates that 20.9 percent of U.S. adults said they were raised Catholic (compared to 21.3 percent in the Pew study) and 2.0 percent converted to Catholicism as an adult (compared to 2.6 percent in the Pew study).

Comparing Poll Results:[*]		
Catholicism and Other Religious Affiliations in the U.S. Adult Population		
	CARA 2003	Pew 2007
Adult Catholics	22.9%	23.9%
-Raised Catholic	20.9	21.3
-Adult converts to Catholicism	2.0	2.6
Adult “Other religion”	58.2%	59.2%
-Other religion, raised Catholic	4.2	5.7
Adult “No religion”	16.3%	16.1%
-No religion, raised Catholic	3.7	4.4
Don’t know/Refused	1.9%	0.8%
-Don’t know/Refused, raised Catholic	0.2	-- ^{**}
	100.0%	100.0%
Raised Catholic, but no longer Catholic:	-8.1%	-10.1%
Catholic Retention Rate:	72%	68%
Latinos identifying as Catholic:	64%	58%

^{*} CARA’s interviews for CCP 2003 were conducted in English and Spanish (margin of sampling error: ±1.6 percentage points). Pew’s interviews were conducted in English or Spanish (margin of sampling error: ±0.6 percentage points). All results were produced with the use of post-stratification weights.

^{**} The Pew report of findings for combines “don’t know” with “other religion”

However, a slight difference between the polls is in the estimated size of the population that is formerly Catholic. CARA estimates that 8.1 percent of the U.S. population was raised Catholic but no longer identify as such, compared to 10.1 percent in the Pew study.¹¹ The

¹⁰ Since 2000, CARA has conducted 19 national random sample surveys of adult Catholics including more than 21,000 respondents.

¹¹ In a 2001 CARA survey, CCP 2001, CARA estimated the number of persons raised Catholic who no longer identifies as such to be 6.2 percent of the U.S. population among those ages 14 and older. This study’s smaller estimate of Catholics leaving the faith is to be expected given the presence of respondents age 14 to 17 in the sample. It is not possible to select out former Catholics who were between the ages of 14 and 17 as they were not asked the age question. Respondents were selected within households by the instruction, “May I please speak with

CARA data indicate that 4.2 percent of the U.S. adult population was raised Catholic and have now converted to another religion (compared to 5.7 percent in the Pew study).¹² CARA estimates a retention rate among Catholics of 72 percent. This may be similar to what Pew would have estimated if the Religious Landscape Survey did not underestimate Catholic affiliation among Latinos.

One aspect that was not addressed in the Pew study was *when* former Catholics stopped considering themselves to be Catholic. Social scientists have long understood that some of those who no longer consider themselves to be a member of the faith in which they were raised, especially those who currently say they are “unaffiliated,” will return to that faith later in life.¹³ Michelle Dillon and Paul Wink’s recent book, *In the Course of a Lifetime: Tracing Religious Belief, Practice, and Change* (University of California Press, 2007) provides a review of important religious lifecycle patterns. Because the Pew report provides no insight into when a person left his or her faith, some have asserted that these Catholic defections likely occurred relatively recently and may be caused in part by the sex abuse scandal or by a continuing shortage of priests.

CARA’s findings from the 2003 poll, shown in the table on the following page, indicate that a more than half of former Catholics stopped considering themselves Catholic before 1988 (54 percent). Respondents had a tendency to cluster responses to this open-ended question, “About how many years ago did you stop thinking of yourself as Catholic?” in round numbers, such as one, five, ten, 15, and 20 years ago rather than intervening years. Overall, 6.9 percent of those who have left the Church did so in 2002 (“last year” or “a year ago”), the year before this poll was conducted (January 2003).¹⁴ Respondents were more likely to say they stopped considering themselves Catholic in five of the last six of these five-year increments (i.e., 7.5 percent in 1992, 7.3 percent in 1987, 9.0 percent in 1982, and 7.1 percent in 1977). Former Catholics were more likely to say they left “30 years ago” than any other response (10.7 percent in 1972). Some 5.1 percent say they stopped considering themselves to be Catholic in 1997, “five years” before the survey being conducted. This is slightly fewer than reported for 2002 (6.9 percent), yet the difference is not statistically significant.

The median age at which former Catholics stopped considering themselves as Catholic is 21. This median age is consistent with research that indicates that these religious changes may

the person in your household who is at least 14 years old who most recently celebrated his or her birthday.” In a 2001 study, American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), the number of persons raised Catholic who no longer identifies as such was estimated to be 4.6 percent of the U.S. adult population. This estimate, even lower than the results of CARA or Pew’s surveys, may be a result of this survey being limited to English language interviewing only.

¹² Also, CARA estimates that 3.7 percent of U.S. adults who were raised Catholic no longer affiliate with any religious faith (compared to 4.4 percent in the Pew study).

¹³ The authors of the Pew study note, “Nor do they [the study results] include people who changed religious affiliation at some point in their lives but then returned to their childhood affiliation” (page 22).

¹⁴ Respondents could also say they left “this year” which would have been 2003. Interviews were conducted in January 2003. Any such responses are included in the totals for 2002 given that no estimate for 2003 could be made on the basis of a few weeks.

often coincide with the young adult stage of life where separation from family, relocation, increased mobility, and marriage are common.¹⁵

About how many years ago did you stop thinking of yourself as Catholic?	
Respondents who were raised Catholic but who did not identify as Catholic in January 2003	
	Percentage of all those who have left the Catholic Church
2002; “last year” or ”a year ago”	6.9%
1998 to 2000	7.1
1997; “five years ago”	5.1
1993 to 1996	6.5
1992; “ten years ago”	7.5
1988 to 1991	4.8
1987 “fifteen years ago”	7.3
1983 to 1986	4.0
1982 “twenty years ago”	9.0
Prior to 1982	33.9
Don’t know	1.1
Refused	<u>6.8</u>
	100.0%

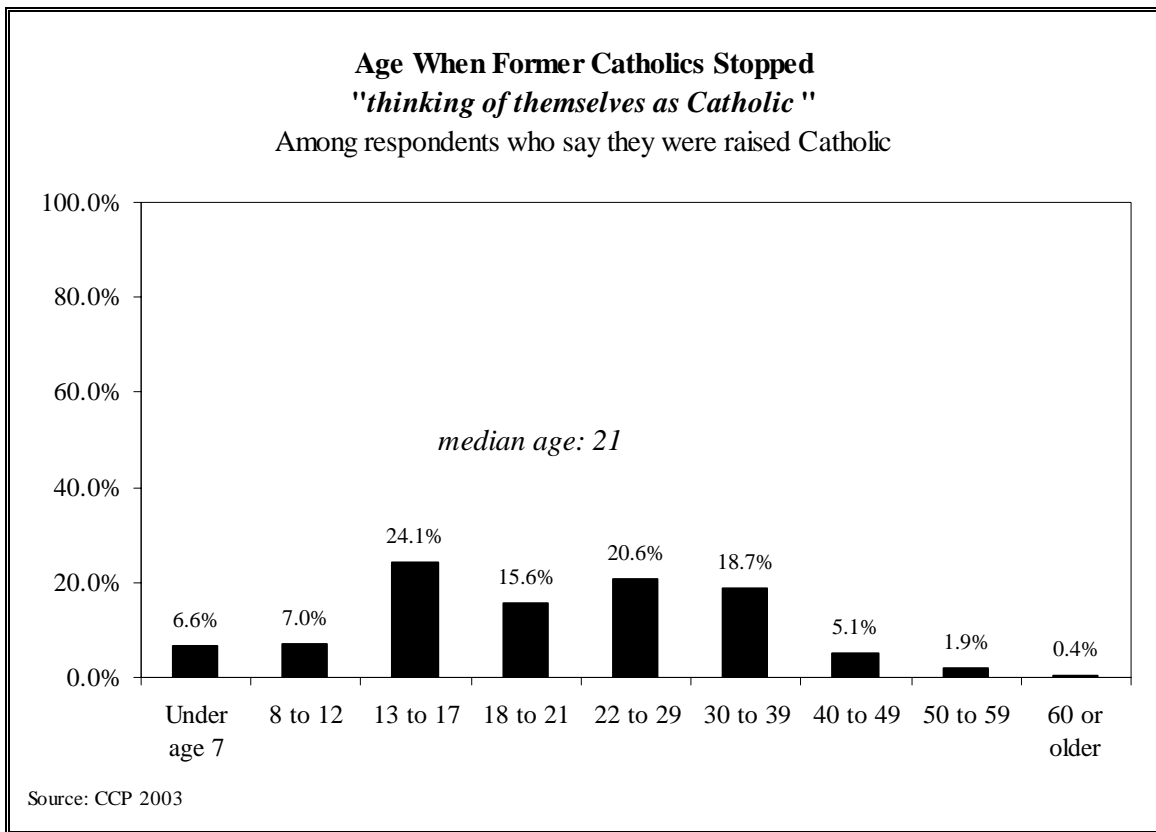
Source: CARA’s CCP 2003
 Note: Responses of number of “years ago” are recoded to reflect calendar years.

As shown in the figure on the following page, 38 percent of those who said they were raised Catholic and later left the faith said they stopped considering themselves to be Catholic *before* reaching the age of 18 and 6.6 percent said they did so before even reaching the age of 7, which is often used as the standard within the Catholic Church for the age of reason/discretion. Only 13.6 percent of former Catholics say they stopped considering themselves to be Catholic after the age of 35.

Recalculating CARA’s estimate for the size of the population that was raised Catholic but who no longer identify as such using a standard that one must have reached the age of 16 as

¹⁵ Respondents were not asked directly about the age at which they stopped considering themselves to be Catholic. Instead, this is calculated using the number of years ago they stopped considering themselves as such and the respondent’s self-reported age/birth year. The median age for having left the Catholic faith has increased by decade from 17 from 1953 to 1962, to 22 from 1973 to 1982, and 26 from 1993 to 2002. These increases may be related to young adults waiting longer to marry. It is also possible that some of those identified as leaving the Catholic faith as a child accurately reported the number of years ago they stopped considering themselves to be Catholic but then also under-reported their age.

Catholic to be considered having been “raised Catholic,” the percentage of the U.S. population made up of former Catholics is 6.1 percent rather than 8.1 percent, resulting in a 77 percent retention rate for those who self-identified as Catholic at age 16 or older in CARA’s 2003 poll.

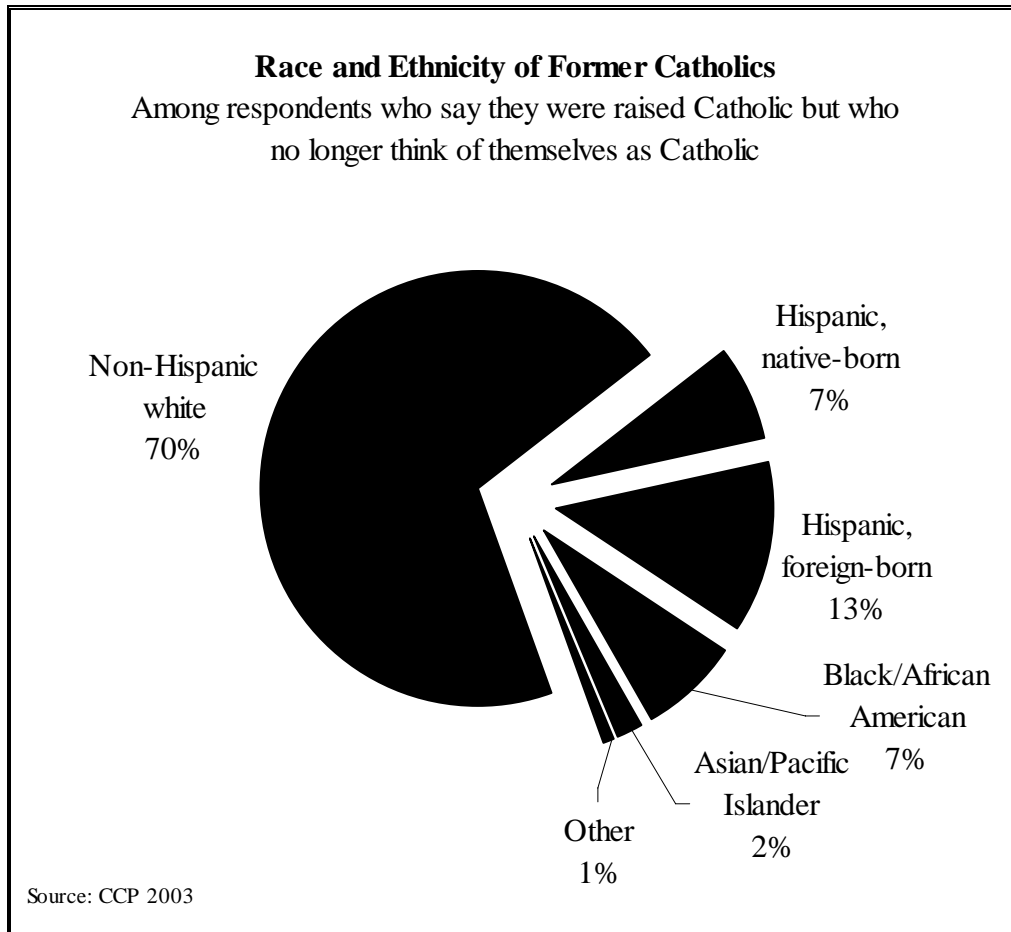


As shown in the figure on the following page, seven in ten former Catholics self-identify their ethnicity as non-Hispanic and their race as white. Two in ten former Catholics self-identify as Hispanic or Latino—7 percent native-born and 13 percent foreign-born. Seven percent self-identify as Black or African American, 2 percent as Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1 percent as some other race or ethnicity.

As noted above, most former Catholics left many years ago when the demography of the Catholic Church was quite different. The race and ethnicity of former Catholics generally reflects the race and ethnicity of Catholics during the last several decades. Thus, it cannot be said that those who have left are either disproportionately Hispanic or disproportionately non-Hispanic white.

In recent decades, through the combined forces of generational change (mortality and fertility) as well as immigration, the racial and ethnic make-up of the Church has shifted. At the time of CARA’s 2003 poll, 82 percent of Pre-Vatican II Generation Catholics (born before 1943) self-identified as non-Hispanic white. By comparison, 77 percent of the Vatican II Generation (born 1943 to 1960) self-identified as non-Hispanic white and only half of the Post-Vatican II Generation (born after 1960) indicated this racial and ethnic identity. Each year the adult

Catholic population becomes more diverse as some in the oldest generation pass on and younger Catholics come of age.¹⁶



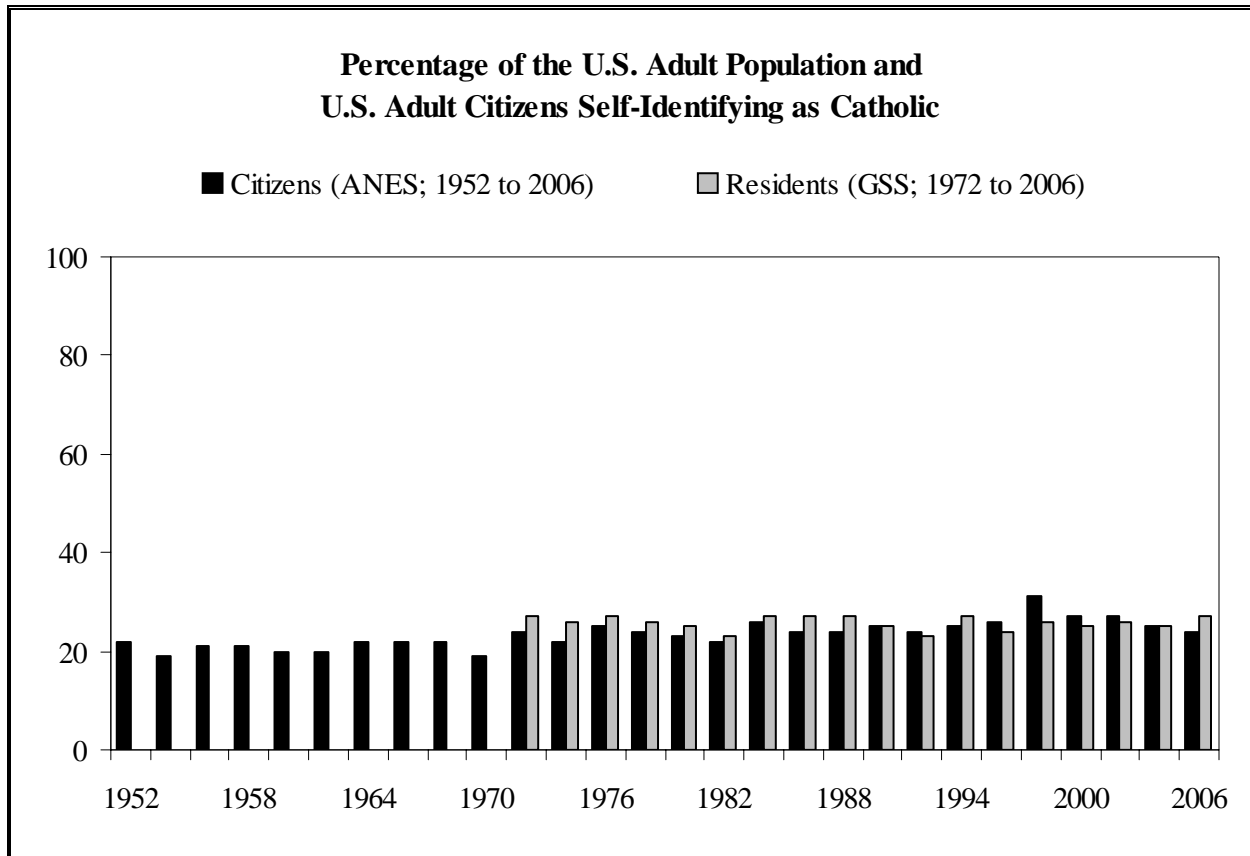
Pew researchers reference the stability of the percentage of U.S. adults self-identifying as Catholic in the General Social Survey (GSS) since 1972. About a quarter of the population typically self-identifies as Catholic in this national survey of U.S. residents. Because many immigrants are Catholic, Pew researchers make the assumption that this trend could only remain stable if native-born Catholics are leaving the faith in great numbers.

However, as shown in the figure on the following page, another widely used academic survey, the American National Election Study (ANES), indicates there has also been great stability in the percentage of U.S. *citizens* self-identifying as Catholic all the way back to 1952.¹⁷

¹⁶ According to the Population Reference Bureau (PRB), the total fertility rate, the average number of children per woman, is the highest in the United States for Hispanics (nearly 3 children per woman) while the fertility rate for non-Hispanic whites is below “replacement” (less than 2 children per woman) the level needed for parents to replace themselves in the population. When many people in a specific population have smaller families, population loss occurs and this can happen rapidly when fertility rates fall below replacement. Through a combination of immigration, higher fertility rates, and generational replacement the number of Hispanic Catholics has grown while the non-Hispanic white Catholic population has declined in number.

¹⁷ The highest ANES estimate for Catholic affiliation among citizens is 31 percent in 1998. However, this coincides with the lowest Protestant affiliation estimate (51 percent) as well and appears to be an outlier result.

About a quarter of U.S. adult citizens self-identify as Catholic, similar to the percentage identifying as such in the general population.¹⁸



In summary, there is no reason to believe that there has been some recent mass exodus from the Catholic faith nor are those who have left disproportionately among any specific racial, ethnic, or citizenship group. Retention rates are the most valid measurements of the magnitude of religious change. The absolute numbers of members lost, given the different sizes of U.S. faith groups, is less meaningful. Without this context, the Pew study may have left the impression that a vast number of Catholics recently got up and left the faith and that these losses were worse than those experienced by any other faith. In relative terms—as the percentage of those who retained the affiliation of their childhood—the Catholic Church has been among the most successful faiths in the United States. The changes that have occurred in the Catholic population have been incremental and have occurred most often among young adults and teen Catholics. These demographics should be a primary area of future study and would be a good focus of efforts to reduce future losses among the Catholic faithful.

¹⁸ Immigrants are among the most difficult sub-groups to survey in the U.S. population, especially those who have immigrated without legal status. They are generally more reluctant than other potential respondents to be interviewed by survey researchers and are also less likely to be reached by a landline phone and may be unable to answer a survey if the appropriate language options are not available to them. These issues are known to create undercounts of immigrants in surveys and even in the U.S. Census. It is not unreasonable to assume, given the results of the ANES, that the Catholics “missing” from the GSS trend are more likely to be recent immigrant Catholics rather than native-born Catholics who have left the Church. It is also reasonable to assume that the percentage of the U.S resident population that is Catholic is generally underestimated in surveys.