

Important Aspects of Catholic Identity for Committed Generations X and Y Catholics

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Introduction

This paper is an ecclesial study of the baptismal response of twenty-three Catholics between the ages of twenty-one and forty-one, from six Catholic dioceses across Australia. The study was undertaken between 2008 and 2010. The purpose of the study was to investigate how committed Catholics from Generation X (born 1961-1975)¹ and Generation Y (born 1976-1990)² came to faith, and why they continued to practise their Catholic faith, despite falling Mass attendance generally. An unexpected result of the study was the strong link made by the participants between their identity as a person and their baptismal call as a Catholic. It became evident that there were four distinct but interacting aspects of how they saw their identity as Catholics.

The Human Person and Religious Identity

God places value upon and gives dignity in Christ to human beings.³ ‘Only when the human person is understood ... as an individual, as a social being, as an

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1. P. Hughes, M. Mason, A. Singleton, & R. Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Final report of a three year study* (Melbourne, Vic.: ACU National, 2006).
2. *Ibid.*
3. John Paul II, (1979) *Redemptor hominis*, 20, at www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_en.html.

historical being, and as being-in-the-world can our theology of human existence hope to be comprehensive and catholic.’⁴ Rahner explains, ‘To be a person, therefore, is to possess oneself as a subject in conscious, free relation to reality as a whole, and its infinite ground and source, God.’⁵ When the whole person is oriented toward God, it is because of the Spirit of God who ‘dwells’ in us, giving life to our mortal bodies (Cf. Rom 8:11).⁶ The study of the human person necessarily involves the study of God.⁷ ‘As this sense of self develops, so too will one’s sense of who God is.’⁸ Young people today are conscious of developing this ‘sense of self’. Identity has been defined in a non-specific way as ‘self in context’⁹ or a ‘process in which the individual draws on both internal and external cultural resources for self understanding and self expression’ and develops and changes over time.¹⁰ Giddens understands identity as a narrative constructed by the individual that is constantly being reconstructed as the individual reflects and reacts to his/her life experiences.¹¹

General writings on identity provide a basic framework from which to analyse and understand religious identity. However, to fully grasp an understanding of Catholic identity, it must be placed within the Catholic tradition. The uniqueness of Catholic tradition is explained by the Catholic theologian, Richard McBrien.¹² He claims there is a unique configuration of characteristics within the Catholic Church, which sets it apart from other Christian denominations: systematic theology, the body of doctrines, liturgical life—especially the Eucharist, the variety of spiritualities, religious congregations and lay apostolates, official teachings on justice, peace, and human rights, the exercise of collegiality, and the Petrine doctrine. The liturgy is at the heart of Catholic identity, subjectively through participation and objectively through the communal celebration.¹³ ‘The Eucharist is the centre and summit of the whole sacramental life, through which each Christian receives the saving power of the Redemption, beginning with the mystery of Baptism, in which we are buried into the death of Christ, in order to become sharers in his Resurrection.’¹⁴

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4. R. P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, rev. ed., (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 158.
 5. K. Rahner & H. Vorgrimer, *Theological Dictionary* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965), 351.
 6. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 162.
 7. Maryanne Confoy, ‘Human Faith, Christian Faith and Religious Education,’ *Word in Life: Journal of Religious Education* 30(3): 108.
 8. *Ibid*, 109.
 9. G. A. Arbuckle, *Crafting Catholic identity in postmodern Australia* (Deakin West, ACT: Catholic Health Australia, 2007), 12.
 10. M. Crawford, & G. Rossiter, ‘Reasons for living: School education and young people’s search for meaning, spirituality and identity’, *Journal of Religious Education* 51(4), 2003: 1-13.
 11. A. Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1991).
 12. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 9.
 13. D. Donovan, *Distinctively Catholic: An exploration of Catholic identity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 102.
 14. John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, 20.

Baptism is ‘directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ ... complete profession of faith, ... complete incorporation into ... salvation as Christ himself willed it to be, ... and participation in Eucharistic communion.’¹⁵ *Lumen Gentium* 31 states the ‘faithful are by baptism made one with the body of Christ.’¹⁶ *Christifideles Laici* 10 teaches that one becomes a child of God through baptism, and with the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the individual becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ This is the baptismal promise which has been claimed by the participants in this study and become part of their identity and self understanding.

Identity was reported as one of three major issues of concern for young people in a consultation with Australian youth and was tied up with an authentic sense of self which is essential for the moral and spiritual wellbeing of the individual.¹⁸ ‘Affirming one’s own “I” and finding one’s place in life are of primary concern to all young people.’¹⁹

While they are connected, being spiritual is not the same as being religious. Religious beliefs define, confirm and establish one’s spirituality. Spirituality deals with the ‘beyond’ and the inner self.²⁰ Spirituality can be expressed powerfully in the self perception of the individual.²¹ ‘Spirituality has always reminded us that we are not God, but we are invited into a relationship with God.’²² It is both personal and psychological.²³ Wuthnow writes that spirituality is much more than going to church and agreeing or disagreeing with church doctrine. It is about a person’s relationship with God and involves a person’s self-identity—feeling loved by God for example.²⁴ Spirituality explains for the individual who we are and where we belong; it is intrinsic to our self perception.²⁵ If people have a great love of God and live by this love they become

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15. *Unitatis redintegratio*: Decree on Ecumenism 22, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, W.M. Abbott, ed., (London: Chapman, 1967), 364. Unless otherwise stated, all references to the Vatican II documents are from the Abbott edition.
 16. *Lumen Gentium*: Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, 31.
 17. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici: On the vocation and the mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world* (1988), at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/index.htm.
 18. Bishops Committee for Justice and Peace, *Young people and the Future* (Melbourne, Vic. for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 1998).
 19. B. Olivera, ‘Maturity and Generation: The Spiritual Formation of Our Young People,’ *Spiritus: Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3.1 (2003): 38-51.
 20. M. Mason, A. Singleton, & R. Webber, *The spirit of generation Y. Young people’s spirituality in a changing Australia* (Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt, 2007).
 21. M. Douglas, ‘The effects of modernization on religious change in religion and America: spirituality in a secular age’, in M. Douglas & S. Tipton (eds.), *Religion and America: spirituality in a secular age* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1982).
 22. R. Lennan, ‘Looking into the Sun: Faith, Culture and the Task of Theology in the Contemporary Church’, *The Australasian Catholic Record*, 84(2007): 459-471.
 23. M. Crawford, & G. Rossiter, ‘Reasons for living’, 1-13.
 24. R. Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). 112.
 25. R. M. Rymarz, & J. Graham, ‘Drifting from the mainstream: the religious identity of Australian core Catholic youth’, *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 11(3), 2006: 371-383.

known to themselves and others as spiritual people.²⁶ Identity for committed Christians would involve both spiritual and religious aspects within specific cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Research design and methodology

The research design and methodology used in this study was the qualitative research method known as Narrative Analysis using Symbolic Interactionism as the theoretical perspective. The epistemology is Constructionism. Data was collected using in-depth, face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions. Purposive criterion and snowball sampling was used to obtain participants for this study.

There were twenty-three participants aged between twenty-one and forty-one years of age. They came from six Australian dioceses. The criterion was that they would be baptised Catholics who attended Mass on most Sundays. Thirteen participants were female and ten were male. Nine females and five males were from Generation X; five males and four females were Generation Y. The group was diverse in background and included five married couples, an ex-religious sister, and one Catholic priest. Seven of the remainder were married and four were single. Seventeen of the participants (74%) had completed tertiary studies. Five participants (22%) were born overseas: Ireland, Jamaica, Malta, or Mexico. All spoke excellent English. Before commencing the interviews, an application was made and granted for ethics clearance from the Australia Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Findings

The twenty-three interviews and subsequent analysis revealed that this was a highly religious group of Catholics with all participants engaging in both private and public religious practices. Most accepted the moral teaching of the Church. In this way they were atypical of younger Catholics today. All but one came from a highly religious family that practised the faith at home and in the parish.

Participants were not asked questions about their identity. However, they were asked a series of questions about their faith development and why they were still practising Catholics. In responding to these questions all participants talked about how being a Catholic was part of their self understanding. An in-depth analysis of the data revealed that for all participants, being Catholic was intrinsic to their identity and to their sense of self. It defined them. It gave them a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose in everything they did. Catholic identity was behind these young adults' decision to attend Mass every Sunday and to be highly involved in Catholic religious practices. They had been born Catholic and they had no desire to change their allegiance. Their faith underpinned the ways

26. Wuthnow, *After the baby boomers*, 112.

in which they conducted all aspects of their life. It was inseparable from their view of themselves.

...being Catholic is just as much a part of my life and growing up as waking up or as breathing. It is just as much a part of me as my name. It is part of me. Part of who I am. (#8, F, aged 41)

Expressing one's identity as a Catholic explained where, how and why participants belonged to the Catholic Church. In analysing the transcripts, four key aspects of Catholic identity were identified by the researcher. The researcher gave these aspects the titles: (1) *Catholic Religious Identity*, (2) *Catholic Spiritual Identity*, (3) *Catholic Cultural/Social Identity* and, (4) *Catholic Institutional Identity*. Each helped to explain in part, why participants adhered to the requirements of the Catholic Church regarding the obligations associated with the sacraments,²⁷ as well as why they stayed connected to the Catholic Church. While some participants put greater emphasis on one aspect of identity, all four aspects were mentioned in some way by each participant.

Catholic religious identity

Catholic religious identity is the doing of one's faith and embraces attendance at Mass and belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, living a sacramental life, obedience to Christ and the Catholic Church, and helping in Christ's work.²⁸ Participants found that meeting these obligations was challenging but essential to their wellbeing. For participants not to go to Mass and receive the sacraments was tantamount to denying their faith. It was so intrinsically connected to the spiritual life of participants that to miss going to Mass would be distressing.

If you are ... with people who do not attend Mass ... it's easier to slip out of not making Mass. ... Mass is not a huge priority for a lot of people so ... before you go somewhere you have to be really organized so that you can get to a Church. (#4, F, aged 35)

For participants, belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and listening to the Word of God was axiomatic to the practise of the Catholic faith.

We go because we want to go. I am convinced Jesus is there in the bread and wine and it is like he is inviting us to have a meal with Him, so that is why we want to go. And there is no more important invitation, so we go. (#1, M, aged 37)

27. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Homebush: St Pauls, 1994), nn.2041-2043.

28. *Ibid.*

Participants discussed how going to Mass, praying regularly and receiving the sacraments helped them to live a spiritual life.

It is discipleship, in a sacramental way ... The biggest pools of grace are the sacraments. When I'm praying, and when I am going to Mass and getting to reconciliation then I find I can live that love out. (#21, M, aged 28)

Catholic Religious Identity also has an element of compulsion; to fully embrace Jesus Christ and his teaching, is not an easy path to follow. Participants understood Jesus' command to his followers, to take up their cross and follow him (Lk 9:23) as an invitation to share in Christ's work.

I think you need to put Jesus and what Jesus taught, first. It doesn't matter if you like it or not. You just need to keep that in mind. And that means thinking about others first. You need to pray. I think you need to be in grace ... You need to be close to God through reconciliation and to receive the sacraments. (#3, F, aged 32)

Attendance at Mass nourished their inner self and enabled participants to live out their baptismal call in the world.

That sense of coming together ... for renewal and a bit of solidarity and obviously the Eucharist, as the nourishment for us to go out and live our lives again as we do for the next week. (#20, M, aged 40)

The rituals of the Catholic Church were cherished by these people and provided an opportunity for growth and renewal.

I like the Communion, confession ... and how you can get the saints to pray for you and I like the Mass, ... how each thing means things ... the procession of the gifts is when you offer up your things. (#11, F, aged 28)

Catholic Spiritual Identity

Catholic Spiritual Identity occurs when the individual knows God in their heart. It is about the 'feeling' of one's faith because it is based upon the individual's relationship with God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

For me to be Catholic is that I am involved in the life of the Church and I partake in the sacraments ... The fundamental, foundational aspect of it is my belief and relationship with God, but because I am living that

within the organizational structure of the Church and the wider church community, I think that makes me Catholic. (#9, F, aged 37)

Participants remained connected to the Catholic Church because they had accepted the invitation to enter into a relationship with God.²⁹ An individual's faith experience has two dimensions; 'the prior condition of God's free gift of faith' and second 'the individual's capacity for making a response to God which is uniquely their own.'³⁰ Participants believed that to have a relationship with Jesus Christ they needed to make an adult commitment to God through conversion. At the heart of St Paul's teaching was the challenge and call to personal conversion and commitment to Christ.³¹ This desire for an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ was articulated clearly by participants.

I couldn't have maintained my faith if I didn't have that personal relationship with Jesus. I think it was always there throughout my life because faith was always such a strong part of our family. But I think it only became personal, when I started going to youth group and I started hearing other people talk about Jesus in their life. (#18, F, aged 34)

Once participants made the decision to follow Christ, they then attempt to 'come to a better, clearer, more critical understanding'³² of what they had come to believe. Seven of the participants had undertaken theological study post school. They were studying theology in order to gain greater understanding and thereby deepen their faith.³³ Living in an intimate personal relationship with Jesus made participants deeply aware of God's all embracing love and care for them. Their prayer life became deep and personal.

It is like a counselling service. I can talk to God ... It is significant to have someone who just accepts you for what you are. (#15, F, aged 40)

Trusting in God and seeking His guidance in every aspect of their daily life became fundamental to their well-being.

The verse we had at our wedding 'Trust in the Lord with all of your heart, lean not on your own understanding, seek His will in all that you do and He will show you the Way.' That was our wedding song. (#5, F, aged 37)

29. Lennan, 'Looking into the Sun', 459-471.

30. Confoy, 'Human Faith, Christian Faith and Religious Education', 97.

31. Donovan, *Distinctively Catholic*, 15-16.

32. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 41.

33. *Ibid*, 40.

The Trinity became the pivot of the lives of the participants, which put demands on them to be ‘light to the world.’

It raises the stakes because I say we take this stuff seriously so therefore our lives need to be lived true to this call; to make Christ present, to be witness to Christ by living a fully human life, by being fully alive ... that light might shine out from within ... To be Catholic is deep and meaningful for me. (#19, M, aged 40)

In contrast other participants indicated that Mass gave them a unique kind of calm and peace from an otherwise hectic life. ‘I suppose it is a calming influence on the rest of your life’.

Cultural/Social Identity

The third major aspect of identity *Cultural/Social Identity* involves living out one’s faith within a cultural context. Many expressed their Catholic identity as being important because it was closely entwined with all aspects of their family life and culture. ‘My identity is being a Catholic’. This was especially so for those from ethnic families.

Michelle³⁴ was raised in a Catholic family where the practise of the Catholic faith was paramount. ‘There was never any question about being Catholic ... I would say basically I was born into a Catholic family. We were all Catholic.’ The influence of the family on participants was foundational.

A young person may belong and even attend church every week out of habit; and in time accept this as one of the things one does on Sundays, but fails to examine the reason and beliefs behind going to Mass on Sunday and all that implies.³⁵ Berger and Luckmann have given the title *habitualization* to this phenomenon which when repeated frequently become cast into the individual’s pattern for daily existence.³⁶

Just, that’s my life. That is what I was born into, that’s me. See I don’t know anything different being Catholic or not being Catholic. I don’t know what it’s like not being Catholic. That’s what I am. I am a follower of God and I don’t know any different and I don’t want to know any different. (#17, M, aged 38)

Cultural heritage applies not only to those from a first generation ethnic background but also to those participants who were fifth generation Australians

34. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their privacy.

35. Rymarz & Graham, *Drifting from the mainstream*, 371-383.

36. P.L. Berger & T. Luckmann, *The social construction of reality* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1972).

and were very conscious of their ethnic heritage as indicated by the following participant from an Irish background:

I think too because my spirituality is particularly Anglo-Irish, a deep sense of the sacred in that sort of whole Celtic sense of being still with God, that contemplative aspect of our being. (#23, M, aged 30)

Marriage can be the social driver behind a person remaining a practising Catholic. Jeremiah differed from most of the other participants in that he remained a practising Catholic not through conviction but rather because it was expected by his wife.

Some participants indicated that as they got older they began to appreciate Catholicism as a unique expression of their faith.

...one thing I really love is the Catholic identity ... I've come to appreciate the unique Catholic expression of faith and really loving that and appreciating that as part of my history and upbringing. (#22, F, aged 29)

Being connected to the local parish was another aspect of some participant's *Cultural and Social Identity*. When asked about their place in the community, their first response was 'I am a member of the Catholic Church.'

It is a community group and you can go there to practise the same beliefs that you hold with similar people. (#10, F, aged 21)

All of the participants found the church community was essential in supporting them to live a Catholic life, which in turn was an additional motivation for attending Mass. The Catholic community was the social arena in which they functioned as adults.

I didn't have a support structure. So what I had to do ... was become involved in the Parish ... Catholic groups in the city where we could come together weekly or more often. (#9, F, aged 37)

The data revealed that attending a Catholic Church was not just about going to Mass on Sunday. Participants had discovered that it was about connecting to a wider Catholic network. They listed many social and emotional advantages in having interconnecting networks.³⁷

We went to a gorgeous little Church. We were such a good little community out there. It was a real social thing. (#13, F, aged 37)

37. Cf. U. Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Institutional Identity

Institutional Identity is about belonging. It is to be connected to something far greater than oneself.

It gives me a sense of belonging in community but not only that it gives me a sense of purpose every single day, in everything I do. I couldn't imagine what it would be like not to have faith ... it is the glue that keeps my life together...in every aspect. It is what keeps me together. (#7, F, aged 38)

Participants indicated that a core part of their identity was to know that they belonged to the Body of Christ. This was the essence of their being. It linked them closely to their religious commitment, their personal life as a Christian and their commitment to attend Mass at least weekly.

That's my identity; it is part of my identity ... belonging to the Body of Christ, being part of the Body of Christ, being part of this world wide group of people who believe in the same things, by and large. But ultimately we are all part of the Body of Christ. (#20, M, aged 40)

An appreciation by participants of the universality of the Church was integral to their identity as one forty year-old male said: 'I like that anywhere in the world you go to a Mass, it's the same, the teachings and the beliefs, and the prayers. We all believe the same thing.'

World travel or experiences such as World Youth Day enabled young people to see the Catholic Church as a truly universal church. Pope John Paul II wrote: 'A Youth Day offers a young person a vivid experience of faith and communion.'³⁸ Half of the participants had travelled overseas and believed it energised their faith to realise they have brothers and sisters all over the world who are sons and daughters of the same Father, and who share the same beliefs and doctrines.

The long history and tradition of the Catholic Church was salient to the *Institutional Identity* of most of the participants.

OK, for me to be Catholic means to be part of a living tradition that binds together the faith of the living and of the dead ... I am connected to something that is beyond space and time, to be bound to something that is profoundly meaningful and universal. (#19, M, aged 40)

38. John Paul II, *Letter of John Paul II to Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio on the Occasion of the Seminar on World Youth Days Organized in Czestochowa*, (8 May 1996), 3. at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/1996/index.htm.

Belief in the teachings of the Catholic Church was a compelling reason for the participants to remain connected to the Catholic Church.

For me to be Catholic means, I practise in the Church, the one, true original church. We believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist ... We still belong to the Pope. We have got the history, the founding, and the strength of the Vatican. (#12, M, aged 23)

Seeing oneself within the context of the Catholic Church addresses the individual's need for connection to something or someone, in this case the Catholic Church.

Conclusion

For the participants, being Catholic explained their identity and helped them understand themselves in relation to God, the Church and the wider world. They said it was intrinsic to their understanding of themselves. Establishing one's identity as a Catholic was strong motivation for attending and continuing to attend Mass on Sundays. It revealed a high level of importance of faith for the individual which involved them having few doubts about their faith. Catholic identity is defined by the researcher as a baptised Catholic living one's life as a follower of Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit according to the Catholic tradition. Four aspects of Catholic identity emerged: *Religious Identity*, *Spiritual Identity*, *Cultural/Social Identity*, and *Institutional Identity*. *Religious Identity* contained an element of compulsion, for example the individual must attend Mass on Sunday. *Spiritual Identity* was about one's relationship with God, how the individual understood him or herself in relationship with God. *Cultural/Social Identity* was about living out one's faith within the context of family and the individual's social milieu. *Institutional Identity* was understood as belonging to the Catholic Church. It may be summed up as follows: Catholic Religious Identity was the *doing* of one's faith, Catholic Spiritual Identity was *feeling* one's faith, Catholic Cultural/Social Identity was *living* one's faith, and Catholic Institutional Identity was *belonging* to one's faith. Each of these aspects of identity formed part of the participants' sense of self and their world view. For some, one aspect had greater meaning than another, but all four were observed to some degree in each participant and were all influential factors in explaining their Catholicity and their religious intensity.

Finally it is worth noting that all but one participant came from a highly religious and involved Catholic family and in which family members continued to practise their faith and to involve religious practice in family get-togethers.
