"I Shouldn't Be Here":
Implications of Catholic Deconversion Narratives for Catechesis

And I'm actually crying as I write these words because there is so much about this tradition that I hold so dear, and I feel like I'm abandoning the real Church, the people of God, my fellow sisters and brothers, but at the same time I've had enough. Enough. *Enough.* I'm just too worn down. I'm tired of explaining how one can't ever stop being Catholic and of talking of my formed conscience and the terrible beauty of holding in tension one's love for the Church and one's distaste for certain teachings because it's getting harder and harder to convince myself, let alone others. I'm sure I believed it once, that I could remain a Catholic despite the institutional Church, but my ever-tenuous conviction has faded fast these last few weeks. This place has become too foreign to me, and I can no longer call it home. And I'm so, so sad about that. My heart is so heavy it feels like it's crushing me. I can't catch my breath. But I won't be able to catch it if I stay. And I might be able to, if I go. So, standing at the edge of the pool, I jump. I'm done.
--Kate Henley Averett, "Done"[1]

Introduction

The above excerpt from the blog post Kate Henley Averett wrote almost a

year after her essay was published in *From the Pews in the Back: Young Women and*

Catholicism was the first concerted exposure I had to the phenomenon of Catholic

deconversion, which constitutes the focus of this study.[2] Embracing a worldview

she felt was no longer compatible with a wider Catholic perspective, Averett was

"done" being Catholic. For the sake of her ability to live, move, and have her being,

she decided to leave behind the tradition in which she was raised and took the risk

of seeking out a new way of inhabiting her place in the world.

As I reflect on her story and the stories of the three participants in the study

I'll introduce in a moment, I am increasingly convinced that Catholic catechists have

much to learn from Catholic deconversion narratives. In this presentation, I will

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[1] Kate Henley Averett, "Done," From the Pews in the Back: Young Women and Catholicism website http://fromthepewsintheback.com/2010/04/14/done/ (accessed November 30, 2012).
[2] Ibid., "Mass in the Dining Room," in *From the Pews in the Back: Young Women and Catholicism,* ed. Kate Dugan and Jennifer Owens (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 140-144.

argue that the three deconverts you'll meet practice a kind of spiritual integrity

stemming from an inability to sustain conflicting worldviews and a desire for

consistency between belief and action. The experiences of these three participants

weave one thread of the tapestry; they do not speak to the wide and varied

experiences of all deconverts from Catholicism. That said, it is a thread worth

tugging on, for the reasons I outline here.

Too often, we as catechists turn to practicing Catholics, to "insiders" for

answers to questions about what it means to be Catholic. I intend to demonstrate

that deconverts from Catholicism, have something to teach both academic and

pastoral communities about Catholic practice. While I do not argue that those

deconverts interviewed here hold a monopoly on spiritual integrity, I do put forth

that their willingness to act consistently with their consciences is a witness to

Catholic communities, both academic and pastoral.

There are multiple ways of being a person of integrity; by no means is the

practice of spiritual integrity limited to those who act on their consciences in a way

that necessitates the leaving of Catholicism. Those who hold beliefs contrary to the

teachings of the Catholic hierarchy but stay within the boundaries of the tradition

also are acting on conscience, also practice a form of spiritual integrity. Elsewhere

in *From the Pews in the Back*, Margaret Scanlon illustrates her own perspective on

the matter:

> I simultaneously love and loathe my church. Is it perfect? Far from it.
> Then what makes me stay? It's the knowledge that my church—for all
> its imperfections, sins, and failings—is part of my genetic code. My
> insides. Not only because it is my biological and spiritual family, but
> also because it is where, to my chagrin, I feel God speaking to me and

molding my life.[3]

Neither one perspective nor the other has more or less spiritual integrity within them; both are examples of individuals calling into question the tenets of the faith with which they were raised, making an adult decision about that faith, and following where that decision leads. They speak to the diversity of ways of being faithful to conscience.

Body

Terminology

Deconversion has been defined in at least seven ways. The first definition comes from Patrick Hornbeck, who describes the phenomenon in its Catholic iteration as "the process of leaving the Catholic tradition without the expectation of joining another."[4] This was the primary definition upon which I drew in outlining my study.

However, Heinz Streib and his team of researchers discuss six forms of deconversion, describing deconverts as those who find they cannot abide normative beliefs or practices within a particular religious tradition. Streib and his colleagues emphasize the moment after the choice to move on from the home tradition, expanding the conversation about deconversion to describe six deconversion trajectories: secularizing exit, oppositional exit, religious switching, integrating exit,

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[3] Margaret Scanlon, "Why I Stay," in *From the Pews in the Back: Young Women and Catholicism*, ed. Kate Dugan and Jennifer Owens (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 95.
[4] J. Patrick Hornbeck II, "Deconversion from Catholicism: Mapping a Fertile Field," *American Catholic Studies* 122 (2011): 5.

privatizing exit, and heretical exit.[5] *Secularizing exit* consists of "termination of

(concern with) religious belief and praxis, termination of membership in organized

religion."[6] This type of exit is consonant with the definition of deconversion that

Hornbeck provides. *Oppositional exit* describes the way in which one takes on

another belief system that is in higher tension to the wider culture than the original

belief system, e.g. converting from Catholicism to a form of Christian

fundamentalism.[7] *Religious switching* refers to a change in religious affiliation that

involves "no difference in terms of integration," while *integrating exit* entails the

adoption of a new belief system that more fully integrates the practitioner into it.[8]

Privatizing exit denotes "termination of membership, but continuity of private

religious belief and private religious praxis," while *heretical exit* is related to the

"[i]ndividual heretical appropriation of new belief system(s) or engagement in

different religious praxis…without new organizational affiliation."[9]

John D. Barbour notes in the introduction to *Versions of Deconversion,* "[t]he

Latin root of the word *conversion* means to 'turn around' or 'transform,' indicating

the radical nature of this event…. I shall use the term *deconversion* to designate a

loss or deprivation of religious faith."[10] Regardless of the scholar framing the terms

of the conversation, all three of the perspectives presented thus far contain a

subtext, an unspoken value judgment that upholds theistic perspectives over and

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[5] Heinz Streib, Ralph W. Hood Jr., Barbara Keller, Rosina-Martha Csöff, and Christopher F. Silver, *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America.* (Göttingen, GE: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 26-28.
[6] Ibid., 26.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 28.
[10] John D. Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith.* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 1-2.

above atheistic or agnostic perspectives, religious over secular. The term itself is

biased in the direction of a normative claim in favor of religious practice. Further,

Streib and his colleagues speak of *heretical exit*, the underlying ecclesiology of which

concentrates sacred power within the hands of the few who have positioned

themselves to determine doctrine, failing to acknowledge the varied ways in which

the members of that Christian tradition might actually put their faith into practice.

These terms are flawed, but I have chosen to use them here for the sake of

continuity with the wider academic conversation that is taking place on the topic of

this study. I had hoped that more appropriate terminology would emerge from the

interviews, but two of those interviewed connected with the language of

deconversion and one self-identified as a nonobservant Catholic.

Quantitative Research

In 2011, the Pew Forum reported that, "Catholicism has suffered the greatest

net loss in the process of religious change. Many people who leave the Catholic

Church do so for religious reasons; two-thirds of former Catholics who have become

unaffiliated say they left the Catholic faith because they stopped believing in its

teachings, as do half of former Catholics who are now Protestant. Fewer than three-

in-ten former Catholics, however, say the clergy sexual abuse scandal factored into

their decision to leave Catholicism."[11] In addition, Pew's Faith in Flux study tells us

that of those who were raised Catholic and are now unaffiliated, almost ¾ gradually

drifted away, almost 2/3 no longer believed in the church's teaching, and almost ½

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[11] Pew Forum, "Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation."
http://www.pewforum.org/2009/04/27/faith-in-flux/, Pew Forum (accessed February 8, 2016).

felt their spiritual needs no longer were being met. For those leaving Catholicism

for a Protestant tradition, the most common response was that their spiritual needs

no longer were being met.

Qualitative Research

In a small qualitative study of just three interviewees in California, I used

purposive sampling by which participants were selected by a common

characteristic; in this case, that characteristic was that participants had left the

practice of Catholicism and had not moved into another religious faith. As a result of

my use of purposive sampling, these findings are not generalizable. However, they

are useful in helping us come to some conclusions about what could be helpful in the

way we think about the reasons they provide for leaving the practice of Catholic

faith. My findings were these: (1) those leaving the practice of Catholicism reported

that they had begun to feel that their actions were inconsistent with their beliefs as

a result of holding a perspective that was different from the predominant Catholic

worldview and (2) letting go of active participation in a Catholic community was a

way to alleviate that feeling of inconsistency.[12] Rather than jumping to the question

of how we will bring my peers back right away, let's first look at what they're saying

on the way out the door of our churches.

Scott, a Mexican-American man in his late 20s, had this to say about his

process of leaving Catholic practice:

> I guess at some point, not necessarily wanting to be there, in
> combination with not really buying into the story that you're being

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[12] All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

> told, I just kind of stopped going and stopped...I don't know. I do
> think, especially in high school and while I was going through
> Confirmation, I wasn't really buying it but I really appreciated the
> sense of community, spending time with friends and that part of
> religious life, that sense of community, or any kind of community
> really, but that wasn't enough. Like if I'm not again buying what's
> being sold, I can still hang out with my friends after they've left
> church. And I do think also, you know, into my teens and beyond, at
> some point, it felt wrong to be a part of something that I wasn't...
> almost like hypocritical. As you age out of being dragged to church,
> you know, I had friends who were choosing that this was important to
> them, what they believe, so they were actively making this choice to
> be religious or however you want to frame it, so for me just to go and
> be daydreaming and looking at my watch and thinking things in my
> head that were probably inappropriate in church, it became, I
> shouldn't be here.

In this way, Scott had a different worldview than the one that the church put

forward. He enjoyed being a part of the community, but he moved on from Catholic

practice in order to let go of the inconsistency he felt between his worldview and

that of the church.

> Mark, a White man in his early 30s, said this:
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> I also got into a lot of trouble in school and things like that, pretty
> much always for causing some sort of controversies, you know,
> theological arguments I would get into with priests and nuns at
> school, pretty much...during the 2000 election, I just started laughing
> and walked out of church because the priest said that if you vote
> against George Bush, you vote against the church and against Jesus
> Christ—yeah, and they almost kicked me out of high school for that. I
> almost didn't get confirmed for refusing to write that non-Christians
> couldn't go to heaven, things like that, would start major arguments
> with authorities, but in my head, it was always the same as Jesus was
> doing when he sent everything over in the temple. That was my
> thought process about it.

For Mark, a narrow vision of what it means to be Catholic on the part of a clergyman

sent him away from Catholic practice.

Implications for Catechesis

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis tells of the church's maternal concern for "*'the baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism*,'[12] who lack a meaningful relationship to the Church and no longer experience the consolation born of faith" (*EG*, 15). In some ways, these are the deconverts of whom we have been speaking.

What are the implications of this data and of the example of Pope Francis for our catechesis? First, we need to look inward—at ourselves individually and at the church of which we are a part—and get our house in order. As individual catechists, we need to do everything we can to care for our own spiritual and emotional selves. This is not only the case because we need to honor our relationship with Christ, but it is also the case because we need to honor our relationships with the members of his church, our fellow disciples along the way. When our lives bear good fruit, we have the potential to attract people to the tradition from which we draw the goodness that leads to that fruit. For pastoral workers—lay and clergy alike—Pope Francis encourages us to say "yes to the challenge of missionary spirituality, no to selfishness and spiritual sloth, no to a sterile pessimism, yes to the new relationships brought by Christ, no to spiritual worldliness, and no to warring among ourselves" (*EG*, 78-101).

This commitment to spiritual care is true for us structurally, as well. The issues the sex abuse crisis has raised about accountability are worthy of our attention. The ecclesial system that simply reassigned priests who were harming the vulnerable among us is a broken system. While the institutional church is

starting to address its brokenness, we need stronger structures of accountability

that include the voices of laypeople and clergy alike not only to protect our children,

but also to honor the differences among us.[13] In many ways, this broken system is

still in place, moving pastors and priests with proven limited capacity for leadership

from parish to parish. We need stronger collaboration between our clergy and our

laypeople. And we need to utilize tools of discernment that enable us to see clearly

where the gifts in our community lie. We need priests who wholeheartedly embrace

models of servant leadership, and we need laypeople who are willing to work

alongside them, offering the gifts they have to their communities, as well.[14]

To this end, we need to meet our young people where they are, practicing

hospitality and nonjudgment. When young men like Mark no longer feel there is a

place for them in the Catholic community because they hold a different perspective

on a political issue than their priest does, God's house is in disorder. We need to

learn from their example of following our consciences and acting in a way that

reflects what we believe. On the parish level, if young adults come to our parish, we

need to do things: (1) We need to respond in measurable ways to their needs based

on actual conversations with them that let them define what those needs are. (2)

We need to recognize that the role of the more mature members of the parish is to

mentor them in their spiritual growth. The desire to be at church is enough. If

someone comes to the parish saying, "I want to be a Catholic because my wife is,"

that is enough. Where they start is not necessarily where they will stay, especially if

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[13] See also *Governance, Accountability, and the Future of the Catholic Church,* ed. by Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett (New York, London: Continuum, 2004).
[14] See also Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004).

they have a supportive community that intentionally provides space and resources

for them to grow in discipleship. Let's foster environments that provide

opportunities for our young people to grow in their faith.

Foremost and finally, we need to make their voices heard throughout the

institutional church, especially on issues that we might feel uncomfortable talking

about, that might be controversial (e.g. gender, sexual identity, interreligious

dialogue). We need to bring their experiences on the margins to the centers of

church authority to which we have access (e.g. on the parochial, diocesan, and

national levels). While I'm not advocating putting church teaching to a popular vote,

I do argue that we need to follow the example of Pope Francis, who is reviving

traditions within Catholicism like synodality that have the potential to give voice to

the deepest desires of the global church community. We need to follow our pope's

lead in fostering local church environments that are hospitable to difference and

treat the following of conscience with respect.

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