“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. 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”

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. 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

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,

privatizing exit, and heretical exit. Secularizing exit consists of “termination of (concern with) religious belief and praxis, termination of membership in organized religion.” 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. 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. 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.”

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.” 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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6 Ibid., 26.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 28.
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

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.  

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

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:

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,*” 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. 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.

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

13 See also Governance, Accountability, and the Future of the Catholic Church, ed. by Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett (New York, London: Continuum, 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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