

Leaving Catholicism

While the ranks of the unaffiliated have grown the most due to changes in religious affiliation, the Catholic Church has lost the most members in the same process; this is the case even though Catholicism's retention rate of childhood members (68%) is far greater than the retention rate of the unaffiliated and is comparable with or better than the retention rates of other religious groups. Those who have left Catholicism outnumber those who have joined the Catholic Church by nearly a four-to-one margin. Overall, one-in-ten American adults (10.1%) have left the Catholic Church after having been raised Catholic, while only 2.6% of adults have become Catholic after having been raised something other than Catholic.

Former Catholics are about evenly divided between those who have become Protestant and those who are now unaffiliated with any religion, with fewer now adhering to other faiths. Among Catholics who have become Protestant, most now belong to evangelical denominations, with fewer associated with mainline Protestant denominations and historically black churches. (For an explanation of how Protestants were broken down into evangelical, mainline and historically black churches, see the original "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey" report.)

Current Religion of Those Raised Catholic

	%
Still Catholic	68
Now Protestant	15
<i>Evangelical Prot. churches</i>	9
<i>Mainline Prot. churches</i>	5
<i>Hist. black Prot. churches</i>	1
Now unaffiliated	14
Now other faith	3
	100
N	10,545

Source: 2007 "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey"

Departures and the Life Cycle

Almost half of Catholics who are now unaffiliated (48%) left Catholicism before reaching age 18, as did one-third who are now Protestant. Among both groups, an additional three-in-ten left the Catholic Church as young adults between ages 18 and 23. Only one-fifth who are now unaffiliated (21%) and one-third who are now Protestant (34%) departed after turning age 24. Among those who left the Catholic Church as minors, most say it was their own decision rather than their parents' decision.

Among people who were raised Catholic, both former Catholics and those who have remained Catholic report similar levels of childhood attendance at religious education classes and Catholic youth group participation. Additionally, one-quarter of lifelong Catholics say they attended Catholic high school, somewhat higher than among former Catholics who have become Protestant (16%) but roughly similar to former Catholics who have become unaffiliated (20%).

Religious Education Classes, Youth Groups and Catholic High School

	Now unaffiliated	Now Protestant	Still Catholic
	%	%	%
Religious education classes as child	68	68	71
Religious youth groups as teen*	32	29	32
Attended Catholic high school	20	16	25
N	401	343	287

*Includes only those respondents who participated in Catholic youth groups.

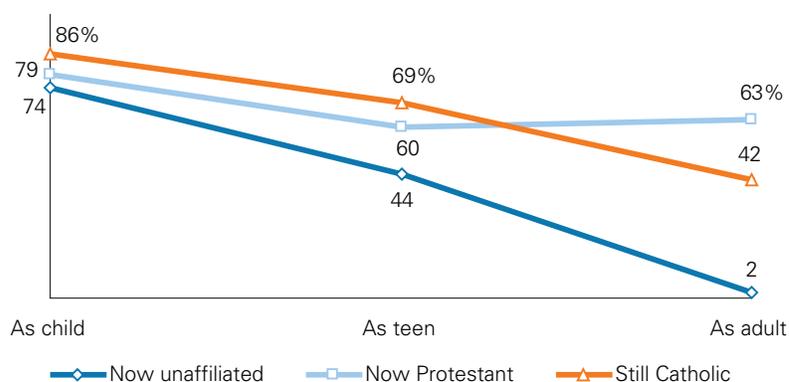
See Q.8, Q.11, Q.11a and Q.10b in survey topline for exact question wording.

At least three-quarters of people raised Catholic say they attended Mass at least once a week as children, including those who later left the Catholic Church. But those who have become unaffiliated exhibit a sharp decline in worship service attendance through their lifetime: 74% attended regularly as children, 44% did so as teens and only 2% do so as adults. For those who are now Protestant, attendance also dropped

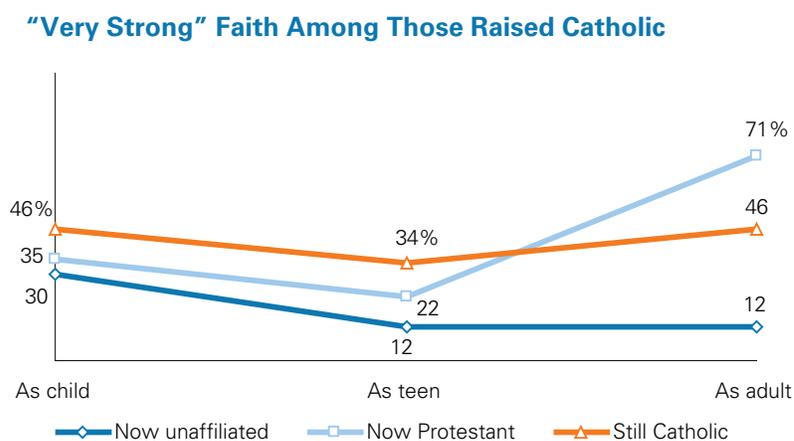
between childhood (79% attended weekly) and adolescence (60%). As adults, however, weekly church attendance has remained stable among this group (at 63%). Among lifelong Catholics, weekly church attendance dropped from 86% during childhood to 69% during adolescence and continued to decline between adolescence and adulthood (to 42%).

Religious Attendance Among Those Raised Catholic

% who attend worship services at least weekly



While 46% of lifelong Catholics report having had very strong faith as children, only 35% of Catholic converts to Protestantism and 30% of those who have become unaffiliated say the same. For all three groups, strength of faith declined at least slightly between childhood and teen years, dropping 12 percentage points among lifelong Catholics, 13 points among those who are now Protestant and 18 points among those who are now unaffiliated. From teenage years to adulthood, however, reports of very strong faith increased dramatically, from 22% to 71%, among former Catholics who have become Protestant. Among lifelong Catholics, 46% say they now have very strong faith. Former Catholics who are now unaffiliated exhibit no change in strength of faith between adolescence and adulthood.



Reasons for Leaving Catholicism

When asked to say whether or not each of a number of specific items was a reason for leaving Catholicism, most former Catholics say they gradually drifted away from Catholicism. Nearly three-quarters of former Catholics who are now unaffiliated (71%) say this, as do more than half of those who have left Catholicism for Protestantism (54%).

Majorities of former Catholics who are now unaffiliated also cite having stopped believing in Catholicism’s teachings overall (65%) or dissatisfaction with Catholic teachings about abortion and homosexuality (56%), and almost half (48%) cite dissatisfaction with church teachings about birth control, as reasons for leaving Catholicism. These reasons are cited less commonly by former Catholics who have become Protestant; 50% say they stopped believing in Catholicism’s teachings, 23% say they differed with the Catholic Church on issues such as abortion and homosexuality, and only 16% say they were unhappy with Catholic teachings on birth control.

Reasons for Leaving Catholicism

	Now unaffiliated	All	Now Protestant Evangelical	Mainline
Common reasons for both unaffiliated and Prot.	%	%	%	%
Just gradually drifted away from the religion	71	54	54	53
Stopped believing in the religion's teachings	65	50	62	20
Spiritual needs not being met	43	71	78	57
Common reasons for unaffiliated				
Unhappy with teachings on abortion/homosexuality	56	23	20	31
Unhappy with teachings on birth control	48	16	12	26
Unhappy with way religion treated women	39	16	11	31
Unhappy with teachings on divorce/remarriage	33	23	21	31
Common reasons for Protestants				
Found a religion they liked more	10	70	70	69
Unhappy with teachings about the Bible	29	43	55	16
Dissatisfied with atmosphere at worship services	26	32	36	22
Less common reasons for both				
Clergy sexual abuse scandal	27	21	19	19
Unhappy with rule that priests cannot marry	24	21	17	30
Married someone from a different faith	13	29	22	44
Dissatisfied with clergy at congregation	18	27	23	39
Unhappy with teachings on poverty/war/death penalty	24	11	11	10
Uncomfortable with feeling of community at congregation	19	20	17	30
Moved to a new community	10	14	11	20
Religion drifted too far from traditional practices such as Latin Mass	8	11	11	10
Someone they were close to passed away	7	8	6	10
Became separated or divorced	5	3	2	6
N	379	320	190	122

Respondents were asked whether or not each item was an important reason for leaving their former religion and could answer "yes" to more than one reason. See Q.4a-Q.4s in survey topline for exact question wording.

Perhaps not surprisingly, those who express dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church's teachings on birth control, among those who are currently unaffiliated and Protestant alike, overwhelmingly contend that the Catholic Church is too strict and conservative on this issue; very few say the Catholic Church is too relaxed and liberal about birth control.

Nearly All Who Left Over Birth Control Say Catholicism Too Strict

	Now unaffiliated	Now Protestant		
		All	Evangelical	Mainline
	%	%	%	%
Unhappy with teachings on birth control	48	16	12	26
<i>Too strict and conservative</i>	46	13	9	23
<i>Too relaxed and liberal</i>	1	3	3	3
<i>Neither/Both/Other/Don't know (VOL)</i>	1	0	0	0
Did not leave religion for this reason	52	84	88	74
	100	100	100	100
N	379	320	190	122

See Q.4s and Q.5s in survey topline for exact question wording.

Among former Catholics who are now Protestant, 71% say they left Catholicism because their spiritual needs were not being met, making this the most commonly cited reason for leaving the Catholic Church among this group. A similar number (70%) say they left the Catholic Church because they found another religion they liked more. Having found a religion they liked more than Catholicism is cited by almost equal numbers of formerly Catholic evangelical and mainline Protestants (70% and 69%, respectively). By contrast, lack of spiritual fulfillment is a particularly common impetus for leaving Catholicism among those who are now members of evangelical Protestant churches (78%) but is cited less often by former Catholics who have become members of mainline Protestant churches (57%).

The survey finds other interesting differences between those who have left Catholicism for evangelical and mainline Protestant churches. Most converts to evangelicalism (55%), for instance, say that dissatisfaction with teachings about the Bible was a reason for leaving the Catholic Church, compared with only 16% among current mainline Protestants. The two groups also express concerns of a different nature about the Bible. Most evangelicals who left Catholicism over concerns about teachings on the Bible (46% of all formerly Catholic evangelicals) say the Catholic Church did not view the Bible literally enough. Mainline Protestants, however, are not only much less likely to say concerns about the Bible led them away from Catholicism, but those who were led away by such concerns are also much more evenly divided as to whether the church viewed the Bible too literally (6%) or not literally enough (8%).

Evangelical Converts Say Catholic Church Did Not View Bible Literally Enough, Mainline Protestants Not as Concerned

	Now unaffiliated	All	Now Protestant Evangelical	Mainline
	%	%	%	%
Unhappy with teachings about the Bible	29	43	55	16
<i>Viewed Bible too literally</i>	20	3	2	6
<i>Did not view Bible literally enough</i>	4	35	46	8
<i>Neither/Both/Other/Don't know (VOL)</i>	5	6	8	2
Did not leave religion for this reason	71	57	45	84
	100	100	100	100
N	379	320	190	122

See Q.4r and Q.5r in survey topline for exact question wording.

Mainline Protestants are much more likely than their evangelical counterparts to say they left Catholicism because they married a non-Catholic (44% vs. 22%) or due to dissatisfaction with the priests at their parish (39% vs. 23%). In addition, nearly one-third of formerly Catholic mainline Protestants (31%) say unhappiness with the Catholic Church's treatment of women led them away from Catholicism, compared with only 11% among evangelicals.

Overall, fewer than three-in-ten former Catholics agree that the clergy sexual abuse scandal played a role in their departure from the Catholic Church (27% among those now unaffiliated, 21% among those now Protestant). About one-in-five former Catholics (19% of those now unaffiliated and 20% of those now Protestant) say they left Catholicism due to discomfort with the feeling of community at their parish. Those who take this view tend to say their parish did not have enough sense of community. Significant minorities, however, say their parish community was too close, with too many people involved in other people's business.

Among Former Catholics, Discomfort With Sense of Community at Parishes Leans Both Ways

	Now unaffiliated	All	Now Protestant Evangelical	Mainline
	%	%	%	%
Uncomfort. with feeling of community at congregation	19	20	17	30
<i>Not enough feeling of community</i>	10	10	8	16
<i>Too close/Too many minding others' business</i>	5	7	6	10
<i>Neither/Both/Other/Don't know (VOL)</i>	4	3	3	5
Did not leave religion for this reason	81	80	83	70
	100	100	100	100
N	379	320	190	122

See Q.4n and Q.5n in survey topline for exact question wording.

When asked to explain in their own words the *main* reason for leaving Catholicism, upwards of four-in-ten former Catholics (48% of those who are now unaffiliated and 41% of those who are now Protestant) cite a disagreement with the Catholic Church's religious or moral beliefs. Among former Catholics who have become Protestant, nearly one-in-five (18%) say their departure was due specifically to discomfort with the Catholic Church's teachings about the Bible. This view is particularly common among former Catholics who now belong to evangelical Protestant denominations (24%). One-fifth (21%) of those who are unaffiliated volunteered specifically that they do not believe in the Catholic religion (or any religion) and an additional 4% indicated a lack of belief in God altogether.

In Their Own Words - *Main* Reasons for Leaving Catholicism

	Now unaffiliated	All	Now Protestant Evangelical	Mainline
	%	%	%	%
Religious and moral beliefs	48	41	45	25
Religious teachings	41	40	45	22
<i>Do not believe in former religion/any religion</i>	21	16	18	15
<i>Do not believe in God/Jesus</i>	4	*	*	0
<i>Stopped believing/Lost faith/Became skeptical</i>	3	1	1	*
<i>Biblical/Scriptural reason</i>	2	18	24	4
Moral/Social teachings	9	1	0	4
Religious institutions, practices and people	36	29	27	37
Likes/Dislikes about organized religion	14	6	6	8
<i>Pedophilia scandal/Molestation</i>	2	3	3	2
Religion's rules, rigidity, etc.	14	6	3	11
<i>Former religion/adherents hypocritical, intolerant, etc.</i>	7	2	1	4
Particular churches/members/leaders	10	17	16	19
Spiritual/Social connectedness	2	3	4	2
Personal spirituality	6	9	10	5
Saved/Accepted Jesus/Born again	0	5	7	1
Life cycle changes	5	17	13	29
Family reasons	4	17	12	29
New circumstances	1	1	1	*
Other reasons	10	7	7	6
Just drifted away/Fell away/Do not go to church	4	1	1	1
Don't know/Refused	4	3	2	5
N	379	320	190	122

Respondents were asked to describe in their own words the main reason for leaving their former religion and could provide more than one reason. See Q.3 in survey topline for exact question wording.

Likes and dislikes about religious institutions, organizations and people are also cited by large numbers of converts as the main reason for leaving Catholicism; nearly four-in-ten former Catholics who are now unaffiliated (36%) say they left the Catholic Church primarily for these reasons, as do nearly three-in-ten former Catholics who are now Protestant (29%). Somewhat fewer former Catholics (5% of those who are now unaffiliated and 17% of those who are now Protestant) say they left Catholicism mainly due to changes in their lives, such as getting married or relocating to a new area. Among former Catholics who now belong to mainline Protestant denominations, however, nearly three-in-ten (29%) name these as the prime reasons that motivated their departure.

Reasons for Joining Current Religion

In addition to asking converts why they left their childhood religion, the survey also inquired as to why converts became part of their current religion. When asked why they joined their Protestant denomination, former Catholics most commonly cite enjoying the religious services and the style of worship of their new faith, with fully eight-in-ten (81%) expressing this point of view. Feeling called by God to join their current faith was also mentioned by a majority (62%) of those raised Catholic who have since become Protestant. Those who now belong to evangelical denominations are especially likely (74%) to say this was an important factor in their conversion, compared with just 31% who switched to a mainline Protestant faith. Three-in-ten former Catholics who have become Protestant say they were attracted by a particular minister or pastor, and the same proportion say they joined their new religion because a member invited them.

More than one-quarter of former Catholics who are now Protestant (28%) say they joined their current faith because they married a member of their current religion. This reason for joining is particularly common among former Catholics who are now mainline Protestants (41%). It is much less common among evangelical Protestants (23%) and even less so among those who are now unaffiliated (10%). Across all groups, relatively few former Catholics say they joined their current religion because they relocated, lost a loved one or became separated or divorced.

Reasons for Joining Current Religion Among Former Catholics

	Now unaffiliated	Now Protestant		
	%	All	Evangelical	Mainline
Enjoy the religious services and style of worship	--	81	82	80
Felt called by God	--	62	74	31
Asked to join by a member of the religion	--	30	30	28
Attracted by a particular minister or pastor	--	30	29	33
Just do not believe in God/most religious teachings	42	--	--	--
Just have not yet found the right religion for them	33	--	--	--
Married someone from the religion	10	28	23	41
Moved to a new community	9	19	15	26
Someone they were close to passed away	7	6	6	2
Became separated or divorced	3	2	1	3
N	393	334	199	127

Respondents were asked whether or not each item was an important reason for joining their current religion and could answer "yes" to more than one reason. See Q.17a-Q.17j in survey topline for exact question wording.

When asked why they chose to become unaffiliated with any particular religion, roughly four-in-ten former Catholics indicated they just do not believe in God or the teachings of most religions (42%). Many former Catholics who are now unaffiliated, however, remain open to the possibility that they could some day find a religion that suits them; one-third say they just have not found the right religion yet.