



# Why adults become Catholics

A qualitative research study in the  
Catholic Diocese of East Anglia

**October 2023**

**Philip Kemp**

**Rebecca Bretherton**

**Michela McNally**

**Hamish Macqueen**

The Diocese of East Anglia  
Commission for the New Evangelisation

## **Contents**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Part1: Introduction and background</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Part 2: Research methodology</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Part 3: Research results</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Part 4: Discussion</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Part 5: Implications for evangelisation</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Part 6: Conclusion</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Topic guide for semi-structured interviews</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Thematic analysis</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Appendix 4: Participant Consent Form</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Tables</b>	
<b>Table 1: Summary of religious background of study participants</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Table 2: Primary Themes</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Table 3: Braun and Clarke’s 6 phase guide to performing thematic analysis</b>	<b>35</b>

## **Abstract**

The decline of institutional religious affiliation, including to the Catholic Church, is well documented. However, worldwide, the Catholic Church continues to grow. Counter culturally, even in largely secular societies such as the UK, some adults continue to decide to join the Catholic Church. The question arises as to why such individuals choose to do so.

This qualitative research study conducted semi-structured interviews with a demographically diverse group of ten individuals from the Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia (RCDEA) who had recently joined the Catholic Church. Half of the participants had previously been practising Christians in Protestant or Evangelical churches. A topic guide reflecting the research questions was used to frame the interviews. The primary focus of the interviews was to explore reasons why each participant decided to join the Catholic Church. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcripts of the interviews formed the data which was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2014).

The results identified six main themes which represented different dimensions of a complex, multifactorial and protracted process contributing to study participants' decisions to become a Catholic. Whilst distinct in themselves each theme was integrally inter-related. The six themes identified were: 1. Spiritual restlessness; 2. Intellectually driven; 3. Affective attachment; 4. Serial illuminations; 5. Discovery of reverence; 6. Key end stage facilitators.

The implications for Catholic evangelisation arising from the results suggest that they present some challenges in respect of evangelisation strategies and practices, in particular for individuals whose journey into the Catholic Church is characterised by the thematic dimensions identified as important in this study.

## **Acknowledgements**

Particular thanks is due to all of the study participants who agreed to be interviewed at some depth on a deeply personal area of their lives. They responded with enormous insight and understanding to searching questions and inquiry. The research could not have taken place without their willing participation. Bishop Emeritus, the Right Rev. Bishop Alan Hopes, recently retired Roman Catholic Bishop of East Anglia, provided encouragement, support and approval for this research to be undertaken for which grateful thanks is offered. Thanks is also due to members of the RCDEA Commission for the New Evangelisation for their various contributions towards the undertaking of this study.

Philip Kemp  
Principal Investigator

## **Preface**

This Report, entitled 'Why Adults Become Catholics', is the result of recent research undertaken on behalf of the diocesan Commission for the New Evangelisation. I am immensely grateful to the ten participants who have displayed such generosity in willingly sharing their experience. The entire work of evangelisation takes us to the heart of the human soul and the personal encounter with the Most Holy Trinity. The content of the Report is wonderfully communicated through personal stories which provide a ready and focused access to what is crucial to the whole mission here in East Anglia.

I am grateful to the members of the Commission who have applied their expertise to the establishment and advancement of this project. A rigorous research methodology was employed in the collection and collation of material. The analysis provides us with an interesting insight into the experiences of many individuals and communities. I encourage all members of our diocesan family to read and discuss the Report within the context of our Synodal journey. This Report provides an important contribution to our reflections on the future of our pastoral structures and mission. I have recently presented a set of detailed questions to the Clergy on this very subject, questions that will soon be distributed for consideration by parish pastoral/advisory councils and then by parishes in council.

Whilst acknowledging the challenges that await us in relation to the work of evangelisation, let us prepare for the future with confidence for the Gospel is forever new and the Church is forever young.

Rt Rev Peter Collins, Bishop of East Anglia

## **Introductory words**

This report shows us how people in East Anglia have discovered and accepted the Good News of Jesus Christ in His Church.

The Commission for the New Evangelisation offers this report to our parishes; to parish evangelisation groups; and to individual Catholics to help them understand the factors that brought our brothers and sisters to the Church.

We hope that the report will be read and discussed in our parish communities and become a useful resource as we step out with confidence sharing our faith and inviting others to join us in our worship and service of God.

Rebecca Bretherton, Co-ordinator of the Commission for the New Evangelisation, Roman Catholic Dioceses of East Anglia.

## Part 1: Introduction and background

The decline of religious attachment and church attendance, including a decline in relation to the Catholic Church, has been well documented in recent years and the issue has attracted much academic attention. In the UK, for example, a British Social Attitudes survey of current trends in religious belonging and observance in Britain found that over time, there has been a dramatic decline in the proportion of people who identify with Christianity along with a substantial increase in those with no religious affiliation, and a steady increase in those belonging to non-Christian faiths (Curtice et al, eds, 2019). Most of the shift in the religious profile of the UK has been towards non-affiliation, with 52% of the public now saying they do not regard themselves as belonging to any religion. Of the 11% who regularly attend a weekly service, attendance is highest among those of non-Christian faiths (40%), followed by Roman Catholic (23%) and other Christian denominations (23%). Those identifying as Anglicans are much less likely to attend weekly services (9%) or indeed to attend at all – 57% who identify as Anglicans say they attend “never or practically never” (Curtice et al, eds, 2019).

Similar findings are recorded in the US (Pew, 2009). This study found that 44% of the population left the faith of their childhood, mostly to become unaffiliated. Catholicism suffered the largest net loss in the process of religious change. Many people who left the Catholic Church did so for religious reasons; two-thirds of former Catholics who became unaffiliated say they left the Catholic faith because they stopped believing in its teachings, as did half of former Catholics who joined a Protestant church. In contrast, those who switched from one Protestant denomination to another tended to be more likely to do so in response to changed circumstances in their lives. Nearly four-in-ten people who have changed religious affiliation within Protestantism say they left their childhood faith, in part, because they relocated to a new community, and nearly as many say they left their former faith because they married someone from a different religious background (Pew, 2009).

Parallel with the decline of institutional churches has been interest in the rise of the ‘nones’. That is, those who in surveys state they have no religious affiliation. In a large Pew survey one fifth of the population were found to be ‘none’ and this rose to one third for those aged under 30 (Pew, 2012). The extent of the non-religiously affiliated in young people aged 16-29 was similarly found across Europe, including in the UK where as many as 70% of those aged 16-29 were ‘none’. One of the reasons accounting for such high rates is ‘generational replacement’ and the Europe study appeared to provide evidence of this. For example, taking France and the UK together, four out of every five young adult ‘nones’ in both countries deny having had any previous religious affiliation. That is, they were brought up with no religion, and have retained it into adulthood (Bullivant, 2018). Of interest in the Pew survey, 68% of the ‘nones’ retained a general belief in God. Crucially, however, they were not looking for a religion (Pew, 2012).

It should be noted, however, that concerns about the decline in the numbers of those who identify as Catholic (or indeed other Christian denominations) is primarily a concern of modern industrialised countries and that in developing societies the Catholic Church is

growing. According to *Vatican Catholic Church Statistics*, as of the end of 2022, the Catholic population worldwide is continuing to increase. The largest increases has been in the continent of Africa, followed by America and Asia. There has also been an increase in Europe which in previous years had decreased in numbers of Catholics. (Agenzia Fides, 2022). The Catholic population in the US has been stable largely due to migration from Latin America (Pew, 2012). There has been a similarly stable Catholic population in the UK (ONS, 2021) and can also likely be attributed migration.

There is also a growing body of research and theorising on why people leave organised religion (for example, Jones et al, 2016, Pew, 2009) and more specifically, those who leave the Catholic Church (for example, Bullivant et al 2019; Pew, 2009). There appears to be limited research, however, on why individuals might decide to *join* the Catholic Church.

One of the most notable theorists and researchers providing explanations for Christian conversion is Lewis Rambo (for example, Rambo, 1993). Drawing on his own research and wider subject disciplines, he outlines an integrated theory of conversion whereby the decision of an individual to join a religion is the result of a complex series of sequenced phases which are dependent on socially contextual factors as well as individual characteristics. Research specifically related to conversion to Catholicism also indicates multiple factors are involved in individual's decisions to become a Catholic as well as it being a staged process consistent with Rambo's work (for example, Halama and Halamova, 2005; Weddell, 2013). However, why people become Catholics remains an under-researched area. In the UK a valuable recent contribution has been made by Longhurst (2021). This also provides evidence that becoming a Catholic is a complex, multi-factorial process.

Why adults decide to join the Catholic Church in societies otherwise characterised by steady decline, and why they are drawn to Catholicism rather other denominations, are questions that are worthwhile investigating. Research identifying factors which influence individual's decisions to become a Catholic could potentially help inform strategies for evangelisation or specific evangelisation practices. This study aimed to explore these issues.

## Part 2: Research Methodology

The following research aims and research questions were identified and informed the methodological approach adopted.

### Research Aims

The aims of this study were to:-

- (i) Explore the range of factors which influence adults to become Roman Catholics in the Diocese of East Anglia.
- (ii) To identify relevant aspects which might potentially inform future evangelisation strategies and practices within the Diocese.

### Research questions

The following three research questions which the study intended to address were:-

- (i) What factors influence individuals to decide to become Catholics?
- (ii) Why do individuals choose to become Catholics rather than join other denominations?
- (iii) Where relevant, how do individuals become engaged with the RCIA process as their route to becoming Catholics?

### Research design and methodology

#### ***Design***

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Qualitative research investigates phenomena from study participant perspectives allowing for deep exploration of their experiences, motives, understandings and 'realities', and in the process producing rich data for analysis. Such an approach lends itself to exploring factors that are less amenable to measurement as well as complex inter-related factors that are not readily delineated. This understanding therefore informed the methods used for data collection and analysis.

#### ***Methodology***

Each study participant was invited to take part in an individual semi-structured interview. Qualitative semi-structured interviews are an established method in social research. Their value lies in their potential to explore subjective viewpoints and gather in-depth accounts of individual's particular experiences. The objective of semi-structured interviews is for the interviewer to facilitate the interviewee to speak openly about their experiences. The



interviews were carried out in a conversational style. This approach allowed participants to respond from their own perspectives and also facilitated the exploration of themes participants generated themselves during the course of the interview. The interviews were guided by a topic guide which reflected the research aims (Appendix 1). In practice little reference was made to this during the course of the interviews as the natural flow of the conversation addressed the relevant areas as well as additional aspects arising from participant responses.

The interviews ranged between 45 to 60 minutes in duration. They were audio recorded and the recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim into a typescript. The interview transcripts formed the anonymised raw data on which the data analysis was based.

### ***Data analysis***

Data (i.e. the interview transcripts) were analysed using a process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2014). Thematic analysis is a systematic process for identifying themes and patterns within qualitative data. It is a pragmatic approach to qualitative data analysis which does not utilise prior theoretical frameworks. There are a number of phases in the process of thematic analysis with data analysis extending from data collection through to final data interpretation. Themes identified capture important dimensions of the original research questions and represent a degree of patterned meaning drawn from participant responses. (See Appendix 2 for more details on thematic analysis).

### ***Study sample***

This study utilised a convenience sample as is commonly adopted in qualitative research studies. Access to an identifiable population of adults choosing to join the Catholic Church is potentially available from among those who engage in Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) programmes run by parishes within the Diocese. The Diocesan Year Books indicate that on average approximately 65 individuals commence the programmes each year. The RCIA programme was viewed as a convenient means of accessing a sample of potential study participants but need not be the only means of accessing a suitable sample.

All parish priests within the Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia (RCDEA) were sent a letter from the Bishop asking them to approach potential participants from among parishioners who had taken part in a parish RCIA programme in the previous 5 years. The parish priest was asked to seek interested parishioner's permission to forward their name and contact details to the lead researcher. They were then contacted by email by the lead researcher to confirm that they were interested in taking part in the study and, where this was affirmative, they were then sent a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 3) providing details of the study and what participation in it entailed. If they wished to proceed (or if further clarification was needed) they were invited to make contact. Arrangements in respect of a mutually suitable date and venue for the interview was then arranged. Six of

the eventual sample were accessed through their parish priest in this way. In order to identify additional participants members of the Diocesan Commission for the New Evangelisation, some of whom were also facilitators for parish RCIA programmes, were asked to identify potential participants from their own local knowledge. Using the same criteria and the same procedure a further four participants were identified who agreed to take part resulting in a total of ten study participants.

### **Ethical scrutiny and oversight**

The research was conducted within established principles and recognised codes of research ethics for undertaking social research. The research ethics framework set out by the Social Research Association in their document *Research Ethics Guidance* (Social Research Association, 2021). This outlines agreed principles under which social research is undertaken in order to safeguard both the participants and the researchers. The areas it addresses include informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and appropriateness of the chosen research methods.

A process of internal ethics approval and oversight was undertaken by a sub-group of the Diocesan Commission for the New Evangelisation. A research sub-group of the Commission provided scrutiny of the research proposal against the Social Research Association criteria.

Study participants were provided with a detailed Information Sheet (Appendix 3) and invited to seek further clarification about the research and what taking part involved. This written information was supplemented by a verbal explanation at the point of expressing interest in taking part and again immediately prior to being interviewed. Participants were also invited to sign a Consent Form (Appendix 4).

Although it was not anticipated that taking part in the interviews would cause participants distress, the two interviewers (PK and RB) had both undertaken safeguarding training and both had extensive previous professional experience of interviewing individuals in sensitive areas. In addition, RB is the Diocesan Safeguarding Administrator. The Principal Investigator for this study (PK) is experienced in conducting and supervising academic research.

## Part 3: Research results

### Participant characteristics

Although qualitative research studies do not aim to achieve a representative sample it is of interest to have an idea of the general characteristic of the study participants. A total of 10 participants were interviewed. Of these 5 were male and 5 female. Their ages ranged from 23 to 61 years old with an average age of 41. The 10 participants were drawn from 8 different parishes across the Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia (RCDEA). All but one participant had taken part in a parish RCIA programme in the last 3 years.

The participants came from a diverse range of spiritual or religious backgrounds or, in some cases, none at all (Table 1). Two of the participants were born or adopted into a non-practising Catholic family and by the time they had made their First Communion became non-practising themselves. One became an atheist when an adult. Five participants were committed Christians and had previously been active within Protestant or Evangelical churches into adulthood. A further participant had been an atheist but had previously identified as Buddhist. Two participants can be described as previously being 'none'. That is, they had either a basic or agnostic belief in God but were not attached to any denomination and religious practices had never previously featured in their lives.

**Table 1: Summary of religious background of study participants, N=10**

Religious background	n	Comments
Born into a non-practising Catholic family	2	1 joined an Evangelical Church in adulthood* 1 became an atheist**
Practising Christian into adulthood in a non-Catholic denomination	5 (+1)*	Including Anglican, Pentecostal, Mormon and free Evangelical churches. Some participants had previously engaged with more than one denomination.
Atheist	1 (+1)**	Previously also identified as Buddhist.
None	2	Including agnostic.
<b>Total</b>	<b>N = 10</b>	

**Results**

Analysis of the interviews identified six primary themes which represent overarching characteristics of the process which led the study participants to become Catholics or to re-engage with the church of their early childhood. Every individual’s journey into the Catholic Church is unique but analysis of the interviews revealed commonalities and patterns which informed the identified themes. Although each theme represents a distinct aspect of the process by which the adult participants in this study decided to become a Catholic the themes are in practice very much inter-related and therefore reflect the complexity of the process by which participants joined the Church.

The six themes identified are listed in Table 2 below:-

**Table 2: Primary themes**

1. Spiritual restlessness
2. Intellectually driven
3. Affective attachment
4. Serial illuminations
5. Discovery of reverence
6. Key end stage facilitators

Each of these themes is outlined below with sample evidential quotes from participant interviews to illustrate key aspects within each theme. Each quote is tagged against the anonymised participant (P) number.

**Theme 1: Spiritual restlessness**

All participants seemed to experience what might be described as a ‘spiritual restlessness’ whereby they appeared to be searching for an outlet for an intrinsic feeling of spirituality. That is, their restlessness was not simply that which is often experienced by individuals who have a general dissatisfaction with aspects of their lives, but rather a specifically spiritual or religious restlessness *and* an accompanying quest for this to be resolved. Moreover, for all but two of the participants who had atheistic beginnings, their restlessness was in relation to a Christian spirituality, including those participants who were already committed and practising Christians within a non-Catholic denomination.

For most participants this feeling of spiritual restlessness appeared to be difficult to articulate but the interviews conveyed, nevertheless, a strong highly personal experiential phenomenon, however vaguely expressed.

An important feature of the experience of spiritual restlessness in this study was that in all cases it was very protracted, sometimes extending over many years, even decades. This was true of those who had not been exposed to a religious upbringing, participants who had

previously identified as atheists, as well as those who had been committed practising Christians into adulthood within another denomination.

One participant's reflection typified the feeling of spiritual restlessness:-

*I just remember that extremely vividly, that longing I had. But what do I do with it? I didn't know... I don't know how to describe it, the only way [is] I felt drawn towards Christ but it didn't seem to happen [i.e., in their earlier religious experiences]. (P1)*

This was similarly described by another participant who had not experienced a religious upbringing but nevertheless had always maintained a general belief in God:-

*I can't put my finger on what it was that pushed me over and brought me in, but I certainly wasn't resisting anything so there was probably a gentle calling there all the time which I wasn't perceptive enough to realise...(P2)*

Again, another participant who had been brought up and remained a committed practising Christian into adulthood was a little more specific:-

*I never turned away from the idea of God being sovereign and the Creator of the world but I needed to develop my character, I think, and I made some bad decisions while I was at university which ultimately forced me to question, you know, how do I want to live and what do I value? (P4)*

Several participants who had been longstanding committed Christians practising in Protestant or Evangelical churches also reported a degree of dissatisfaction or a lack of fulfilment with their previous spiritual attachment, if not to begin with, then certainly eventually. The phrase "*something was missing*" frequently recurred in interviews with these participants. One oft-cited answer to what was missing in their previous church experience was a lack of reverence which tended to be recognised once they were much further along in their journey to Catholicism. This is discussed below under Theme 5.

One participant, who had latterly become disenchanted with the Christian denomination to which they had previously been fully committed, found themselves experiencing an increasing spiritual restlessness in the form of feeling lost with the result that:-

*I was still unable to navigate where I was with my faith. (P10)*

An interesting corollary which served to further underline the idea of spiritual restlessness was the frequency in which participants, once they had joined the Catholic Church, described finally “*feeling at home*”. That is, they had found their spiritual home in the Catholic Church and seemingly a resolution to their spiritual restlessness.

## Theme 2: Intellectually driven

A central accompanying characteristic of participants’ responses to their feelings of spiritual restlessness was that they were highly proactive in addressing them. Their quest for a spiritual home was purposeful and deliberate. There was little evidence of serendipity as to participants’ routes into the Catholic Church. Moreover, the outcome of joining or re-joining the Catholic Church was for most participants an unanticipated turn. There was, ostensibly at least, no inevitability about it or that the participants would find their eventual spiritual home within the Catholic Church.

Participants demonstrated an impressive understanding of church history, Catholic practices and Catholic doctrine during their interviews. It was evident that they had undertaken much reading and also drawn upon a wide range of other resources to inform themselves on matters of religious spirituality and ultimately in Catholic theology and teaching. This long term inquiry into Catholicism was not an esoteric intellectualism, a matter of intellectual curiosity or a striving for learnedness, but rather a search for spiritual sustenance in the first instance, and then eventually to make sense specifically of the teachings of the Catholic Church. Understanding the rationale for key Catholic beliefs was an essential motivation for most of the study participants.

The following quote from a participant, who initially found spiritual inspiration from classical literature, philosophy and current secular commentators, eventually found these sources insufficient:-

*So anyway, I just really enjoyed going back and rediscovering Christianity at its roots. Then I discovered Christ. I rediscovered Christ I would have to say, through reading. And I realised, wow, I really need to read the Bible. And I got really into reading the Bible. And then I guess there wasn't enough substance in Jordan Peterson ultimately or in the other secular people because I wanted to know more about why things are the way they are and I was searching for Christ and the structure of Him and the love that comes from Him not only through his ideas but just the feeling, the whole experience moving me. (P4)*

One participant from a scientific and technical professional background discovered a rationality for Christian and then specifically Catholic belief: “*my scientific journey overlapped with my spiritual journey*”. They appeared to reason their way into understanding Catholic beliefs:-

*I read books, watched documentaries, listened to people, including some theologians who used to be Baptist and became Catholic because they dig so deep into the theology. (P9)*

Other participants, as a result of their enquiries, were drawn to the historical continuity of the Catholic Church:-

*But if you really go into depth and if you've studied history and you are going to the Fathers of the Church and all that, you think well, there's no other way but that to say the Catholic Church is the one. (P7)*

Another participant brought up within an Evangelical church stated:-

*And I didn't grow to sort of understand it. Like, there was the music, the statues, the saints, and that all got explained to me and it made sense. I'm a very logical person so I need things to make sense. And then the things that pushed me over... I looked into it more, so it was the intellectual side. It was The Church, like the only Church, the one Jesus made. So, that was a huge revelation to me because you look at the Evangelicals, 'oh it was John and Bob who made it in Michigan', okay, and you look up Martin Luther, at him, that's why it's called Lutherism, that's why it's called Calvinism, that's why these are called Pentecostals because some guy made it up and, you know all that, they all have an origin point in a person who decides to re-invent something that already existed, which was Catholicism. (P3)*

One participant who had studied history at university had a specifically English historical stance when reaching a conclusion regarding the rationale for the Catholic Church:-

*So, the historical Catholic Church I was absolutely drawn to, whether it was people, sort of English people, like St Bede or St Alfred the Great, or whether it was foreigners, like St Augustine of Hippo, St Thomas of Aquinas, St Pope Gregory, you know, I found it all interesting. But when I was 18, 19, 20, 21, I still held all the prejudices I held against Catholicism. Not only that, it had escalated. I absolutely viewed Catholicism as a threat, I hated Catholicism, not in a violent, nasty view, but my view was that the Greeks and the Russians are deeply Orthodox people by their history and us English, we are Anglicans. The way I viewed it, there's three apostolic branches of Christianity and there is Catholicism, Anglicanism and Orthodoxy. And you know, Anglicanism is the one that is best suited to the people who are English and of English descent (Canadians, Americans, South Africans, Australians, New Zealanders). But there was a huge contradiction there, in that I was completely and utterly, the more I learnt about historical Christianity, traditional Christianity,*

*I supposed the best term would be apostolic Christianity, this had led to an absolute love of Catholic Theology, and, you know, I would spend hours every day listening to Catholic priests, and Catholic podcasts, some Catholic documentaries about what they said was to be Christian, and this dismayed me, because the Church of England for me, as much as I was proudly Anglican, had completely and utterly lost its way. (P10)*

A significant source of Catholic formation for the participants in this study, across all ages, was social media outlets, in particular YouTube channels. Nearly all participants highlighted their reliance on YouTube. YouTube videos appeared not to be sought primarily for inspiration and encouragement, but rather for their information and instructional value. The journey towards Catholicism was in large part predicated on acquiring knowledge and understanding of Catholic teachings and YouTube appeared to provide an easily accessible source as well as sufficiently detailed explanations. Some of the Catholic YouTube channel speakers often cited by participants included Father Mike Schmitz, Scott Hahn, Bishop Robert Barron and Keith Nestor. One participant found enormous value in the talks given by Archbishop Fulton Sheen. His TV recordings from 1960s and 1970s TV are also available on YouTube.

It is notable that participants' developing intellectual understanding of Catholicism was not the result of engaging in a structured educational process or a course on Catholic formation or catechesis. One exception was a participant who had been involved in an Alpha Group, although this was not denominationally orientated. Participants' knowledge and understanding of Catholicism was more usually the result of self-motivated and self-directed exploration taking participants on a spiritual journey, which for some was highly circuitous, where Catholicism was not necessarily the intended destination.

All but one of the participants eventually took part in a parish RCIA programme. (This study did not include an evaluation of participants' experiences of engaging in RCIA programmes). For the study participants their intention to become a Catholic usually pre-dated their engagement with the RCIA. The RCIA programme was the culmination of a long gestation period of spiritual formation. For most it helped to cement and further develop their previous self-directed exploration of Catholicism. In addition, some found it helpful to be able to link with others making a similar journey. The primary benefit of the RCIA programme appeared to be a means of formalising participants' decisions to become a Catholic and also as a vehicle towards undertaking the necessary sacramental steps. The latter were seen by participants as highly significant personal experiences in terms of finding and arriving at their spiritual home. The sacramental phase of the process appeared to make a vital contribution to Theme 3, discussed below.



### Theme 3: Affective attachment

Intellectual drivers appeared to be a very strong factor fuelling the journey of study participants to Catholicism. However, as one participant observed, *“intellectual drivers might take you there but the spiritual and emotional connection keeps you there”* (P3). At various points in the process to become a Catholic, participants seemed to experience particular moments of being profoundly moved in a deep spiritual sense.

Only one of the ten participants reported experiencing what might be described as an overt supernatural encounter (hearing the voice of God and a vision). However, nearly all participants, somewhere along their journey, described some form of deep emotional connection or acute spiritual sensitivity. For example, *“an overwhelming sense of security and reassurance”* (P4), *“a feeling of enormous comfort”* (P8). One participant described an experience of a sudden enveloping sensation of *“God’s love”* which they described as *“a golden moment”* (P1).

As described under Theme 2, whilst most participants emphasised the key role of intellectual drivers in their search for a spiritual home, this ultimately interacted with an affective experience that appeared to act as a catalyst in their individual journeys into the Catholic Church. These affective experiences were not simply a passing emotion experienced in the moment, but rather a deep-seated, spiritually affective response. Several participants particularly linked this feeling with their discovery of reverence as described below under Theme 5.

The interaction between the intellectual and the affective dimensions is illustrated by a participant who attended an Adoration Service for the first time:-

*[I stayed for] Adoration after the Mass. And I’d never experienced that at all. And I was [aware] Christ is present in the Eucharist. Although I knew it and I can accept it but I hadn’t felt it. So I went along after the Mass, and it was so difficult because the acoustics are terrible in that place, and the priest, English was his second language, and the acoustics, and I was learning the thing, I just couldn’t follow it, but anyhow that was okay. And then I stayed for the Adoration and that, I thought this is a long time to just sit here, but it flew by. I was totally overwhelmed. (P1)*

Another participant made a more general observation in relation to the affective impact of Catholicism:-

*Yes, well it must be the whole experience and that’s, again, I’m talking about feelings and about how ooh I don’t like being too feelingly, but it really is a feeling that I get, especially when I’m in the Catholic Church, I feel so at home. So feelings really are or have been part of my coming home to Catholicism. (P4)*

This participant tried to explain further what they meant by 'feeling at home' in the Catholic Church:-

*I think that I mean, it might just be personal to me, but I felt a sense of security from the Catholic Church for lots of reasons but mainly because it's so ancient, its, established. And if you look at it rationally something that's lasted this long there must be something to it, you know. I'm more inclined to go with what people have been doing for a long time as opposed to something that people have come up with recently. So there's that sense of security... [I] feel at home with the authority of the Catholic Church where what I say, me, is not always necessarily the right thing. In fact I need to challenge myself and live by the rules that have been established already. And I think that is a problem for young people now. We are taught that everything we come out with is okay ...We are fundamentally flawed and we need to seek the truth that is external to us in order to become who we are supposed to be inside. That's my way of looking at it which is why I am at home in the Catholic Church as opposed to a lot of the other churches. (P4)*

One participant contrasted their previous religious experiences with how they now felt having become a Catholic:-

*For me it's been a radical changing decision so, I remember I had a terrible feeling, and I remember thinking years ago: I kind of like know everything there is know about Christianity, kind of 'I know it now'. But now I think how massively arrogant, you know. But now I feel like I'm just at the bottom of the ladder and I'm really excited to keep on climbing up. I feel like I have found a home. I feel like I can rest and I feel at peace. (P6)*

P6 seemed to differentiate between a superficial emotional response experienced in their attendance at Protestant services and a deeper emotional feeling experienced in Catholic services:-

*I didn't feel we fitted in socially even though we tried [at Protestant services]. But I didn't have any of those hang ups when I went to a Catholic church, none of those things seemed to matter...I haven't really talked about this before or thought it through so sorry if I'm stumbling. I don't know, it just felt like it wasn't important, the social side. You were there for Mass and you were there for the Communion and, everything was so structured; it was also less emotional...but at the same time there was a deep emotion to what was going on. (P6)*

#### Theme 4: Serial illuminations

As already observed, the period of spiritual restlessness and the subsequent process of becoming a Catholic was for all participants very protracted. There were no Damascene conversions or suddenly 'seeing the light', nor a single overarching decision. Their eventual gravitation towards the Catholic Church largely followed an incremental process involving a stepwise understanding and a heightened appreciation of Catholic beliefs, doctrine and practices. Underpinning this incrementalism was a combination of both the intellectual drivers (Theme 2) coupled with growing affective attachment (Theme 3). The integration of both these aspects appeared for most participants as a series of smaller scale, but highly significant, illuminations as they drew closer to the Catholic Church.

It was notable that for some participants, particularly those from a Protestant or Evangelical church background, their starting point was associated with pronounced anti-Catholic views. Gradually and incrementally they seemed to gain an increasing understanding of Catholic practices and doctrine. This appeared in part to involve a process of de-mystification of inherent prejudices as well as correctives to misunderstandings. But it was also a process of discovering a rationality within Catholic teaching which was in turn informed by their intellectual search for understanding as described above.

Sceptical or even hostile views of perceptions of Catholicism and Catholic practices were sometimes expressed by some participants: -

*I was always taught to be very distrustful of Catholics... They were constantly betrayed to me as backwards, superstitious, naïve, ignorant people, who were also very gullible, very good at handing over their money to the parish priest. (P10)*

*So when [I first went] to Sunday Mass I just stood there and I was like looking at all these statues. It's like oh, this is weird. I had very weird sensations. It was like a repulsion, thinking that's bad, that's bad, and in my head I was pointing out all the things that were wrong. (P3)*

The scepticism towards Catholicism previously held by some participants was not always hostile, however: -

*And to me I thought Catholic people were very nice, well-meaning people, who had it all wrong. I just kind of ignored [Catholic beliefs] and everything I thought about deeper much later. (P6)*

Incrementalism was evident as participants frequently described a process of "working through" Catholic beliefs, for example, in relation to the place of Mary in the Catholic

Church, or the Eucharist or praying to the Saints. One participant conveyed this is a strikingly systematic way which is quoted here at some length: -

*I stumbled across Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. I can't remember how I did it, just one of those things you stumble across. I listened to one of his sermons, I was absolutely in love with the man. And I began listening to him every single day on such huge broad topics. And then one day, when I was at home, university had just finished, I was playing video games, but I wanted something in the background, and it was a sermon called 'The woman I love' and I thought 'Oh, who on earth is that?', not really thinking about it (of course it's St Mary) and you know, I just wanted something nice to listen in the background. So I put it on, and by the end of the lecture, sorry, of the sermon, my whole view and understanding of Christianity had changed. And it was so wonderful, because I now had Mary in my life, but it was so difficult, because as much as I loved Catholic theology, and had had my opinion changed on divorce, contraception, sacraments, marriage and so many other things, there was always some things which were always going to be so superstitious, and silly and backwards that I would never go along with it. And the worship of Saints, as I perceived it to be, was one of them. And I always thought the Catholic obsession with Mary was crazy. I do know that there are some Anglo-Catholics who do have a devotion to Mary, but for me Mary was just so tied up with, like the negative part of Catholicism, that never, ever in a million years... But after listening to his beautiful sermon, just like that, my whole world view was changed. And then I saw another view, and then the other aspect I thought I would never do was the Eucharist, but when I understood properly what it was, and I watched a video ...explaining it and recommend[ing] a book on scientifically recognised Eucharistic miracles, with the Eucharist and Mary, the position became truly untenable. Although I still refused to accept it, I somehow got it into my head that I was going to work through...*

*...But then finally came the impact of St John Henry Newman and understanding his detailed arguments about the role of the Papacy; so at this point I was 100% Catholic, but I was opposed to the Pope. I had this strong emotional dislike of the Papacy. But I realised from his works on the development of Christian doctrine, you know, and the Apologia pro Vita Sua and all his other wonderful works, major works, that without the Pope, without the Papacy, England would never be without the correct style of leadership and authority. And it made me realise that, ever since the Reformation, the Anglo, the Christianity that has been main stream, the establishment Christianity, has failed every single generation in some respect, whether that is not having Confession, or allowing divorce, there's always been something, well, not just something, too many things, countless things, that have failed. Whereas the Catholic Church, whatever problem it's had to endure, the Papacy has upheld the orthodox Catholic and Apostolic correct way of doing things, whether in doctrine, faith and dogma, in Sacraments, you know, whatever. And it's then that I realised, it sort of all came together, so, from my study of history, I realised that Anglicanism was not the native faith of the English people, it was Catholicism (P10)*

A similar experience was recounted by a participant from a previously largely evangelical tradition:-

*Everything I was hearing made sense. I was listening to lots of testimonies.... It was just beginning to build up and I just, I still had, lots of questions. I still was not sure about Mary, purgatory, or praying to the saints, things like that. But I was growing but I couldn't stop, I just couldn't stop listening and reading and at the same time I felt drawn to the Catholic Church. (P6)*

Then later: -

*I wrote [the parish priest] a long email explaining all the things that I agreed with and all the things I didn't agree with and asked considering all the things I do agree with and what I don't agree with is it okay, am I allowed to join the faith? And he said yes these are the things you agree with as long as you keep on thinking about them, as long as you are open to thinking about them and working things out. And I think I've really come to accept kind of almost everything. (P6)*

One example of Catholic belief which Participant 6 had been sceptical about, and which exemplified a transformative illumination, was in relation to the Eucharist: -

*And I heard a talk about the Real Presence and that was it really. But I kind of resisted it. I realised I was convinced that this was true. And so after, from then on I couldn't stop thinking about it. I mean he [Fr Mike Schmidt in a You Tube channel talk] talked through the John chapter 6 section, and it just became obvious. And I just thought oh, it's true, it's just what Jesus said. So I didn't have any resistance to it after that. (P6)*

A further example of an illuminative experience, again in relation to the Eucharist, from a participant who had previously held to an anti-Catholic perspective: -

*I do so remember it. It was the during the consecration and the priest was holding the Host and he said "fruit of the vine and the work of human hands" and it just kind of clicked in me...the bit where they ring the bell and the Sanctus and at the consecration and for the invocation of the Host and the Blood... it was, yeah, a profound moment actually. (P3)*

And again, reinforced by observing another couple: -

*When we walked into the church, we walked past the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and there was an older couple as we walked in. I sort of saw them kneel in front of the Blessed Sacrament Chapel by the door so it's like 'miles away' [from the sanctuary]. So I said what are they kneeling in front of? And I looked, I looked at the tiles, was there something said on the tiles? No, so what are they kneeling for? And so I did that as well because this must be what everyone does. And then I realised that's where Jesus is. To me, and there's a little light there with a little candle in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and, yeah, it just stayed with me forever. (P3)*

For one participant the discovery of Ignatian Spirituality was transformative: -

*Well I was one of those sheep with no shepherd. I was wandering around in the wilderness wondering is that a shepherd or is that a ravening wolf, I can't tell from this distance. So I tried... meditating for a long time...and I looked into Buddhism a little bit. I read some books and felt it was empty, there was nothing there, and I just didn't know what to do. So one day I googled 'Christian meditation' and one of the first hits was Ignatianspirituality.com. So, this was about three years ago now, and I started reading that and there it was: Jesus loves us, God loves us. Why didn't the Catholic Church tell me that when I was growing up, I think it was a very closely kept secret. And so I devoured everything on that site and I felt for the first time I, I prayed to God again. (P1)*

A further form of spiritual illumination described by some study participant were non-parish-based events. These included retreats, pilgrimages and celebratory events. These events were typically one-off but memorable occasions which provided spiritual enrichment. One study participant, for example, described two such events experienced in their journey to embracing Catholicism: -

*I went to the Cathedral in Norwich with Bishop Alan and that was fantastic. And it wasn't part of the process but co-incident with it. I went on a pilgrimage to Walsingham which I thought was really good. Again, the number of people who were there was massive. You know, the number of people there was just fantastic, so that helped. [2]*

Such spiritual illuminations served to gradually undermine res-existing beliefs and prejudices in respect of Catholics and Catholic practices. At the same time, they helped increase understanding and instil new spiritual insights which contributed to participants' journey to becoming a Catholic.

## Theme 5: Discovery of reverence

In this study a significant influential factor which drew participants to the Catholic Church was the discovery of reverence. The use of the term “*reverence*”, and positive references to experiencing it, were repeatedly cited by participants.

The discovery of reverence, which made such an impact, was more than simply the ambience of the church or an aesthetic sensibility which can potentially induce a reverential response. It appeared to arise from a much deeper level in that it was integrally linked to participants’ understanding of Catholic belief, doctrine and practices.

As might be expected, the reverence encountered in the Catholic Mass was frequently observed. One participant, for example, who over a number of years had attended a range of churches and denominations where worship style tended to be relatively flamboyant, admitted to initially finding the Mass “*boring*”. But as their understanding of the Mass developed “*and things started to fall into place*” this gradually and profoundly changed: -

*But there was something, and I knew it had kind of hooked me but I couldn’t identify what it was. And it’s something I’ve seen in other Catholic churches where everybody is very focused on what is happening up there on the altar. (P8)*

For some, the impact of discovering the reverence of Catholic practices was quite salutary and influential to their own thinking. One participant, who had long been a committed Christian and had previously attended Protestant churches, recounted their experience of attending Catholic Masses and also meeting other young people who were committed Catholics while an exchange student at an American University: -

*So I ended up going [to a Catholic Mass]. I went to lots of different churches, but the only one I could actually get too independently on my own feet was the Catholic Church because it was on campus. Everywhere else you had to drive and they were in warehouses and its Texas, so it’s massive. I did go to these other places and they felt very empty, and I didn’t want to be critical but they did feel empty. But I do remember this church on campus. It’s called St Mary’s and I was just blown away. That was when I started to really think about it because they had young people there and they were so reverent. I saw people kneeling and there was a spirit of reverence, whereas all the young people in all the other churches I went to were just kind of goofy. They weren’t reverent. They weren’t bad people but it was a totally different feeling towards their faith, just worlds apart. And also at that time there was another student in the English department in Texas and she was an Orthodox, some kind of Orthodox Christian, I am not quite sure, but she invited me to her home and her husband was an Orthodox priest and they ran, they were sort of in charge, of the community, the Orthodox community. And they had a chapel in their house and they showed me a relic of the cross. And part of my thought was that this is ridiculous. Poor people! But I*

*also thought I had this very powerful feeling when I saw it. I had this desire to go and stand as close as possible to this relic although I didn't understand why I felt like that. And I saw their reverence. Again, it was the reverence. And that sort of, that combined with regularly going to Mass. I went to the 5:30 Mass at St Mary's on the campus. Just sort of changed, changed my attitude to Catholicism and I started to admire it and I admired the people. (P6)*

Reverence was not confined to Catholic Church services but was also sometimes discovered within individual Catholics and how they lived their lives: -

*I think reverence is beautiful, there's a beauty to it and I think that really did affect me. And there was a seriousness to it as well which I hadn't really seen anywhere else. But also the people. They were very warm and friendly. They were pious but not in a negative sense. I had got to know this group of girls that all lived together and they invited me to their home for tea at their house... I found the aesthetic of their home a bit much you know, the Catholic imagery in their house, I found it very weird. But I found them very compelling. One wanted to be a nun which I found absolutely shocking. I could never, you know she was this young girl who had finished her degree and she wanted to dedicate her whole life to being a nun which I had just never met anyone like that. And the others were very articulate and an interesting set of people. Just the contrast between them and the other Christians I met in other groups - lovely people but they didn't seem particularly deep. It just felt they [the Catholic girl house share] were deeper. They had, er, I think I was attracted to the idea that they, that there was more that I didn't know about. (P6)*

Another participant compared the reverence they found in Catholicism with what they had previously experienced in non-Catholic denominations: -

*What was missing from the Pentecostal churches was that: it was the structure and the sense that you were performing actions that were deeply, deeply embedded with powerful meaning and, er, my generation, I'm 28, no 27, my generation are very irreverent. Reverence is the name of the game, you know guys, my friends, people who aren't religious. And it makes me feel sick after a while and it's kind of, it's not nourishing to your spirit and I wanted reverence, I really, really wanted that, I craved it. And I found that the people at the Pentecostal churches, they weren't doing communion every week and it wasn't done reverently when it was done and also the worship was very emotional, if you know what I mean. It was all about how I'm feeling as opposed to how what I know to be right. So what I really like about initially starting off with Jordan Peterson, reading the philosophers and then going to the reverence of Catholicism, was that it was all based on what you know is right. It's not irrational ideas that the Mass and everything you do in the Mass and the communion is all based on ideas instead of feelings and I'm attracted to that much more and I feel like it's much more structured and gives me a lot more... (P4)*



The experience of reverence, for some participants, appeared to evolve from an influential appreciation to become an essential need in addressing their own resolution to their spiritual restlessness.

### Theme 6: Key end stage facilitators

In responding to their spiritual restlessness and seeking a spiritual home, participants in this study were largely internally driven rather than externally motivated. Initially external motivators appeared to play a relatively small role. Most participants found it difficult to pinpoint where this drive originated. With hindsight some participants attributed it to being led by the Holy Spirit but this was seemingly not apparent to them until they reached a time when they could reflect back on their journey to the Catholic Church.

During participants' extended periods of searching, the thematic influences outlined above were the primary drivers. However, it appears that in the latter phases of participants' journeys towards the Catholic Church key individuals did seem to exert an influential and ultimately critical role.

When it came to establishing contact with a significant other who acted as a key facilitator in drawing them into the Catholic Church, it was frequently the participant who initiated the approach. For example, one participant, who had been contemplating becoming a Catholic for some time, eventually *"plucked up the courage to go and approach a priest"* in a church near where they regularly worked: -

*Do you go and knock on a priest's door, do you phone up? I didn't know how to approach the priest really. I suppose, to be honest with you, when I went to Mass [later, in my home parish] you know, I was kind of, I was very nervous and we used to have coffees after the Sunday Mas and I just went up to Father \*\*\*\*\* and said what do I do? And he was really good as well. Just that initial conversation, it felt natural... (P2)*

For most participants a critical step in their journey to become a Catholic was deciding to attend Mass. Study participants frequently reported this first experience as cause of "nervousness" [2], "bewildering" [3], uncertainty about "not knowing what to do" [8], and feeling out of place if "no one spoke to me" [1]. Yet the Mass was frequently cited as an important illuminating experience [Theme 4] and ultimately leading to study participants' routes into formally joining the Church through the connections they made in the parish.

Key individuals who came into participants' lives had both an instrumental and an inspirational influence. In most cases this was the parish priest. They had an instrumental influence in inviting participants to join the RCIA programme and guiding them into and through the sacramental stages of the process. Alongside this instrumental role they also provided inspiration, motivation and encouragement. Typical responses in the interviews were: -

*Well Father \*\*\*\*\* has been so amazing. He really, really - I think if it was not for him I might not have decided to go for it so easily as he was not at all pushy. He was very serious but he was also very light-hearted which I appreciated and I just think there was a real sense of love from him. (P6)*

*But I really value the role of the priests that I've met. One of the big reasons why I joined the RCIA and eventually the Catholic Church was because of the priests. (P4)*

One participant spoke of the approachability of the parish priest after the nervousness experienced at attending Mass for the first time. This was after several years of moving gradually to the Catholic Church. Reflecting on who played the most influential roles in in that protracted journey:-

*After I moved into the Church there's definitely Father \*\*\*\*\* and A\*\*\*\*\* [an RCIA facilitator]. Those are the key people after I made the step. [P2]*

It was not always or just the parish priest (as indicated by P2 above). Sometimes it was another parishioner. For example:-

*My sponsor B\*\*\*\*, but I only met her here in [the parish church]. And she has become a friend. She is very, we are very much aligned I think in our beliefs, yes we are very much aligned. She is a good friend. [7]*

For three of the participants, during the course of their spiritual search, they married a Catholic, although for two study participants it was to non-practising Catholics. It was apparent that marrying a Catholic, whether currently practising or not, presented a potential route to Catholicism but this was not inevitable. What is also evident is that the searching participant appeared to have an evangelising effect on their Catholic spouse with the result that in all three cases they journeyed together with the Catholic spouse returning to the Church and deepening their faith. This was illustrated by one participant who married a non-practising Catholic:-

*I'd say it was me who made the bold steps, and [my spouse] just needed a bit more convincing. [My spouse] was a bit more resistant than I was. [P2]*

But then things “totally changed”:-

*I think at the moment she's with her head in either the Catechism or the Bible. I think she's seriously, she is absolutely - yeah, she's so happy to be back in. [2]*

Another participant had married a Catholic who was still practising:-

*Yeah, he was a cradle Catholic and he remained practising. And he didn't really know that much. Like his catechesis was very basic so we ended up finding out a lot about the faith as we went on already in our marriage. [3]*

So, after a protracted spiritual journey it appears participants took the initiative in establishing one or more significant facilitating contacts within their eventual ‘entry parish’. Sometimes the role was facilitated by a Catholic spouse whether practising or not, sometimes by a parishioner, but most often with a parish priest. Or indeed a combination of these. Most importantly, they linked with facilitators for a critical phase in study participants finally becoming a Catholic.

## Part 4: Discussion

Analysis of the interviews in this study suggests that the process for an adult deciding to become a Catholic is protracted, complex and multi-dimensional. There were no sudden conversions. Similarly, there was no single decision nor single event that provided overwhelming grounds for joining the Catholic Church. Rather there appears to be an incremental process of increasing understanding and insights, spiritually rich experiences, and timely significant relationship encounters which have a cumulative effect over an extended period of time. Moreover, the process of becoming a Catholic did not follow a linear route but instead tended to be more circuitous.

The finding that adults' decisions to become a Catholic involves a complex process that is of lengthy duration is consistent with Rambo (1993) and others such as Weddell (2013) and Longhurst (2021). However, this study did not indicate that there was a more or less set sequence of stages which individuals progressively pass through. The themes associated with becoming a Catholic identified in this study represent dimensions of a process rather than stages. The different thematic dimensions of becoming a Catholic should not be viewed as isolated factors, however. They are integrally inter-related, forming a complex matrix of experience and understanding which combined together formed a powerful impetus towards Catholicism for the study participants.

The inter-relatedness of the thematic dimensions associated with becoming a Catholic in this study is an important aspect of the overall process. An intellectual understanding of the rationale for Catholic beliefs was insufficient without affective experiences and engagement. The catalyst for affective engagement was often the result of the cumulative effect of spiritually illuminating experiences. The discovery and appreciation of reverence went hand in hand with this process. Whilst participants were largely self-directed individuals who found themselves drawn to Catholicism, significant individuals who they encountered as they approached the Catholic Church served as key facilitators which secured their final reception.

It is interesting that none of the participants referred to themselves as 'converts' or the process they went through as 'conversion', terms in which the 'conversion literature' often designates them. This might be because the term conversion implies another agent acting on the individual and moving from one definite state to another. In this study the process was drawn out and incremental and where, moreover, the direction of travel was not pre-determined. In addition, the process of becoming a Catholic was for the most part internally driven rather than externally motivated, at least until the threshold of the Church was reached. At this point key individuals certainly appeared to provide an essential role. These key facilitators provided a vital entry point to the Catholic Church in the final phase of the process. It is as if the lengthy trawler net had been gradually closing and brought participants to the edge of the boat and a key individual finally hauled them aboard.

The universal starting point for participants in this study appears to be a spiritual restlessness which study participants found hard to define and difficult to articulate. For some participants it manifested itself in part from feelings of discomfort with previous forms of Christian-based spiritual expression. For others it was an explicit search to find a way of giving expression to a residual belief in God. The spiritual restlessness participants experienced was not a general spiritual malaise arising from a personal crisis or a general dissatisfaction with life. The spiritual restlessness participants experienced was a narrower spiritual restlessness in respect of how they could find a means of a Christian spiritual outlet with which they could attribute a rationality and where they felt at home. One of the phases Rambo (1993) identifies in his seven phase theory of conversion is 'Crisis'. Others point to experiencing personal problems in the period preceding 'conversion' (Halma and Halamova, 2005). However, personal crisis nor life problems did not appear to be important precipitants in this study.

The study indicated that social media, YouTube talks in particular, provided an important source of information and understanding in respect of Catholic beliefs. The catechising function of these YouTube channels appeared to be more important than their inspirational value alone. For some participants this proved to be an important means of not only understanding Catholic beliefs but also overcoming inherent prejudices that had been long held. Several notable speakers who hosted YouTube channels were identified by participants and a number of these were mentioned by more than one participant. Some participants developed a strong identification with certain speakers who exerted a strong influence on them. The benefits of 'spiritual accompaniment' is frequently referred to in discussions of evangelisation. For example, in Weddell's (2013) widely known exposition, she promotes the idea of spiritual accompaniment to help individuals through the 'thresholds of faith' whereby ordinary parishioners can assist the process by compassionate listening and sharing their own faith story. Given the seemingly strong influence of particular Catholic YouTube channel speakers on study participants' journey into Catholicism, it might be that they serve a similar function as 'virtual companions'.

The discovery of reverence in Catholicism by study participants was not just an attraction to ritual and atmosphere found within Catholic worship, although this did appear to be significant for some participants. There were two other factors of arguably greater importance. Firstly, reverence was intrinsically related to an understanding of the Eucharist in Catholicism. For most participants appreciation of the meaning of the Eucharist was a revelation even if they had previously possessed a theoretical understanding of this aspect of Catholic belief - a key serial illumination. Once understood the link to reverence in Catholic worship was equally understood and appreciated. Secondly, observing Catholics demonstrating reverence served to reinforce its significance. For some of the participants seeing this in their lives outside of formal worship made a further strong impression. For those who had been committed, practising Christians in non-Catholic denominations the contrast was perhaps even starker.

It was notable that participants in the interviews gave less emphasis to Catholic social teaching and community life compared to styles of worship and the sacramental dimension

of Catholicism. However, a frequently mentioned social aspect of the Catholic Church which did make a strong impression was what was perceived to be the social diversity of Catholic congregations, not only in regard to racial diversity but also in relation to perceived social class and background. Several of the participants contrasted this with their experience within Anglican Church.

For most participants engagement with the RCIA programme was the result of being invited by the parish priest or by being pointed in that direction by a parishioner. By the time study participants engaged with the RCIA programme they had already experienced a lengthy journey towards the Catholic Church and the decision to become a Catholic had been made in their own minds. It was not a deciding factor. The RCIA programme, for this group of individuals, notwithstanding the several benefits participants valued within the RCIA, constituted their formal route into the Church rather than a decision-making opportunity. What appears to be of critical importance was engagement with key facilitators at this stage, one outcome of which was linking with the RCIA programme.

As a final note, it is worth observing that study participants, in line with the methodological aspiration to elicit participant perspectives, were not asked about the recent history of sexual abuse and the Church's response to it. Only two participants referred to the issue. This was despite a question inquiring into potential obstacles participants encountered in their decisions to become a Catholic. The two participants who did refer to abuse scandals appeared to separate out their spiritual needs being met within the Catholic Church from its organisational failings. This appears to be in contrast to reasons cited by those who choose to leave the Catholic Church (Bullivant et al 2019).

## Part 5: Implications for evangelisation

The results of this study present some challenges in respect of potentially informing evangelisation strategies and approaches. It is far from clear to what extent the study participants are typical of those adults in the UK who decide to become Catholics in terms of demographic characteristics, spiritual background or personal motivation. However, given the strength of consistency of the thematic dimensions involved in the process across a relatively diverse group of participants from eight different parishes, there does appear to be a group of individuals, at least, whose potential for evangelisation is represented in the characteristics of those interviewed for this study.

There are a number of considerations that arise from the study results. Individuals who become Catholics as adults will likely have had a wide variety of previous religious experiences often within a non-Catholic denomination. This study appears to indicate that there are a group of individuals who become Catholics who arrive with a relatively well developed understanding of Catholicism and with relatively rich spiritual experiences. At the risk of over generalisation, their understanding of Catholicism might be considered deeper compared to many 'cradle Catholics'. This will have potential implications for how they are best served at the stage of informal approaches and engagement with the Catholic Church and subsequently during the more formalised stages such as the RCIA process.

The warmth of welcome from the parish priest and parishioners towards new attenders at their parish Mass might be expected to provide positive encouragement and indeed participants in this study found this to be the case. However, this research suggests that it is potentially important to distinguish between established Catholics looking to engage in a new parish from those, like the study participants, who are seeking to become Catholics and had taken a tentative step to attend Mass. Ascertaining the latter is especially important because reaching the point of Mass attendance appeared to represent a significant, self-initiated step in what has already been a lengthy journey. It appears to be a critical stage in process of becoming a Catholic in terms of creating the necessary relationship connections and accessing the more formalised steps to join the Catholic Church.

In a similar way parish priests and others who establish key relationships with adults seeking to join the Catholic Church need to be equally aware of the characteristics of this group and to be able to respond positively and pro-actively in meeting their particular formation needs. Most of the participants in this study took the initiative in making an approach, usually to a priest, and it should be kept in mind that for individuals such as the participants in this study they had already journeyed some way to the Catholic Church and at this point their inquiries were not simply speculative or exploratory.

The results raise questions about how parish RCIA programmes can best meet the needs of relatively well-informed adults who decide to become Catholics. Participants in this study, with only one exception, found the RCIA programme a positive experience and beneficial. This appeared in large part because it linked them up with a Catholic community and with others making a similar decision to their own. They enjoyed discussing the Catholic faith in

an informed way. Perhaps most important was sacramental preparation and the role of the RCIA in providing a formal vehicle into the Catholic Church.

A further area where RCIA programmes might need to give more consideration is the needs of those who are transitioning from a protestant or evangelical church to Catholicism. Half of the participants in this study had previously been committed and practising Christians in a non-Catholic Christian denomination. A similar proportion was found by Longhurst (2021) in her larger study. It is perhaps understandable for this group of adults joining the Catholic Church a too superficial experience needs to be avoided.

One possibility is for the RCIA process to develop more explicitly along the lines of a small group of fellow travellers with its value being in facilitating physical, practical, relationship and of course spiritual connections with the parish. Rather than primarily being a source of information and instruction, a more intentional accompaniment model could be considered.

The results of the study suggested that the evangelisation potential of social media, particularly prominent Catholic You Tube channel hosts, cannot be under-estimated. However, the openness and accessibility of social media content providers carries the risk of distorted information and social media company algorithms cannot be relied upon as consistently safe sources. Evangelisation strategies that incorporate social media sources perhaps need to provide some direction and recommendation in this area. The study participants were generally well-informed seekers who were strongly influenced by particular social media evangelists with whom they formed virtual (if one-directional) relationships and a degree of trust implied by the acceptance of the understandings they gained through them. In a way this approximates to the first threshold of 'Trust' described by Weddell in her phases of intentionality (Weddell, 2013) although not perhaps in the form she envisaged.

Whilst the intellectual dimension was common across participants, as already discussed, its effectiveness as a propellant to Catholicism depends on it interacting with an affective dimension. This suggests that the evangelisation process should consider the provision of events involving deep spiritual encounters based on solid teaching. The Mass is the basis of this but participants particularly valued Adoration, Easter Triduum services, and prayer groups and similar spiritual activities within the parish. For some participants extra-parish events such as retreats and pilgrimages provided further enriching spiritual experiences.

In summary, this study does not provide definitive answers as to the best approaches to evangelisation but it does provide areas for consideration and perhaps most importantly, how priests and parishioners can act as key facilitators at a crucial phase for those who have been searching and looking towards Catholicism as a resolution to their spiritual restlessness.



## Part 6: Conclusion

Using a qualitative methodology involving semi-structured interviews with individuals who as adults made the decision to join the Catholic Church, it was possible to search deeply into their motivations and reasoning. The study found that the process of becoming a Catholic was protracted, complex and multi-dimensional. The primary themes identified as a result of the research were strikingly consistent across a relatively diverse group of participants. Becoming a Catholic as an adult is an incremental process entailing a stepwise increase in understanding and spiritually illuminating experiences of Catholic beliefs and practices. Whilst for much of the process it was largely self-directed, in the latter phase the role of key facilitators, especially the parish priest, is of central importance. Engagement with parish RCIA programmes was also a feature towards the end of the journey to Catholicism at which point the decision to become a Catholic had for the most part already been arrived at.

The findings of the study do not lend themselves to prescriptive recommendations for evangelisation strategies and practices. However, they do identify areas of challenge, consideration of which could potentially help inform approaches to evangelisation and build on existing knowledge and expertise.

### **Study limitations and strengths**

Any research involves trade-offs in the methodological decisions made. In utilising a qualitative research design and a relatively small sample it is not possible to generalise the results of the study to the wider population in the same way that is possible in a large scale quantitative study using questionnaire data or similar. On the other hand, the in-depth interviews allowed for a searching exploration of the thinking and motives behind each participant's decision to become a Catholic and for them to speak from their own particular perspectives. There is a potential bias in the sample in so far as those individuals who agree to be interviewed may have patterned characteristics very different from those who would not consider putting themselves forward for interview. However, qualitative studies do not aspire to recruit representative samples. It is worth noting, as stated above, the sample is derived from eight different parishes and is demographically diverse which provides some mitigation against any selection bias. Each individual's decision to join the Catholic Church is unique to them. This research has, however, attempted to identify common threads within the participant sample as a whole.

The application of thematic analysis of the data facilitated a systematic interrogation of the interview data helping to impose a degree of rigour to the results. If the results do not constitute definitive conclusions to the main research question, the overall conclusions do provide potential insights that might contribute to future approaches to Catholic evangelisation. At the very least the findings contribute to evidence which will potentially resonate with tacit knowledge, current understanding and related research into why some individuals decide to join the Catholic Church as adults.

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## Appendix 1: Topic guide for semi-structured interviews

### Research Project: Why adults become Catholics

#### Topic guide for semi-structured interviews

1. Tell me a little about your spiritual or religious background.

##### *Prompts*

- Were you brought up in a religious household?
- Were you engaged in a church in adulthood?
- Did you give religion much thought during this time?
- Were there any factors that pushed you away from the Church?

2. What factors made you start thinking about joining (or re-joining)? the Catholic Church

##### *Prompts*

- Was there a significant event that propelled you on your journey to the Church or a series of events?
- Was there a person of significance in your life that influenced the direction you headed?
- Were there any other important factors influencing your journey?
- Was there a moment of decision that you can identify?
- If married or in a partnership, what was your partner's attitude to your decisions?

3. When you were contemplating joining the Catholic Church were there any factors that were holding you back or causing you to hesitate?

##### *Prompts*

- What were they?
- How did you overcome them or reconcile them?

4. In your spiritual journey what led you to the Catholic Church rather than another denomination (Christian or otherwise)?

##### *Prompts*

- Were you previously part of another denomination?
- What specifically drew you to the Catholic Church?

## Appendix 2: Thematic analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using the method of thematic analysis advanced by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013). Braun and Clarke define thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data. Thematic analysis is therefore a form of interpretative analysis whereby raw interactional data (in the case of this study, semi-structured interviews) is made sense of by an iterative process of interpretation whereby patterns in the data build up to inform themes. It is a systematic process using Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework. These are outlined in the table below.

**Table 3: Braun and Clarke’s 6 phase guide to performing thematic analysis**

(Based on Braun and Clarke, 2006)

<b>Familiarising yourself with the data:</b> Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, making notes of initial ideas
<b>Generating initial codes:</b> Interesting facets of the data are coded in a systematic way across the entire data set, bring together data relevant to each code
<b>Searching for themes:</b> Formulating codes into possible themes, collecting all data relevant to each possible candidate themes and sub-themes.
<b>Reviewing themes:</b> Check if the themes work relative to the coded extracts and the data corpus. Generate a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis
<b>Defining and naming themes:</b> Continue analysing each theme, relate the specifics to the overall story the analysis tells which generates clear names for each theme
<b>Producing the report:</b> The final opportunity for analysis. Select vivid, compelling extract examples which relate back to the research questions and literature to produce a report of the analysis

## **Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet**

**Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia**

**Diocesan Commission for New Evangelisation**

**Research Project: Why People Become Catholics**

### **Participant Information Sheet**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Talk to others about the study if you wish.

Ask me, the lead researcher, if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

The aim of the research study is to explore the specific reasons why adults choose to join the Catholic Church.

You have been chosen to be invited to take part in this study as you have been a recent participant of a parish RCIA programme or otherwise recently become a Catholic.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

You are free to withdraw from the study, without giving a reason and not have your information included at any time up to the completion of the Research Report.

If you are willing to participate, the researcher will arrange to meet with you for one individual interview, lasting approximately 45 – 60 minutes, at a mutually agreed date, time and venue. During the interview, the researcher will explore with you the reasons why you chose to join the Catholic Church. For ease of later analysis, the researcher will audio record the discussion as well as take notes.

It is not anticipated that you will be at any disadvantage or suffer any risk from this study. Should a participant become upset during the one to one interview, the researcher will pause the interview and discuss in a supportive manner if the participant wishes to stop, pause, or reconvene the interview at a mutually agreed time. If the participant wishes to continue, the researcher will resume the interview. If the participant wishes to pause for a while this will be facilitated as will reconvening at a mutually agreed time.

The information you share with the researcher will contribute to the further understanding of why adults choose to become Catholics and potentially help inform the Diocese's strategy for evangelisation. Participants will be offered a copy of the Final Report if requested. It is anticipated that the Report will be published and circulated within the Diocese.

All information received from you will be handled in a confidential manner and stored securely including on a password protected computer. An encrypted data stick will be used to store data.

Only the lead researcher will have direct access to the information. Any reference to you will be coded and you will not be identifiable from information included in the final report.

This study is sponsored by the Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia with the approval of Bishop Alan Hopes. It will adhere to the ethical principles and guidance for conducting social research set out by the Social Research Association.

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak with the researcher and I will do my best to answer your questions.

My contact details are:-

**Philip Kemp**

**Telephone number:**

**E-mail address:**

***Safeguarding***

The Catholic Diocese of East Anglia is fully committed to safeguarding in the Church in order to ensure that we maintain peaceful, loving and safe Christian communities in which everybody, particularly young and vulnerable members, can confidently participate.

We have implemented the policies and procedures of the Catholic Church of England and Wales, which is committed to safeguarding as an integral part of the life and ministry of the Church.

## Appendix 4: Participant Consent Form

Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia

Diocesan Commission for New Evangelisation

Research Project: Why People Become Catholics

### CONSENT FORM

I have read the attached participant **Information Sheet** on the research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information.

The researcher has explained the nature and purpose of the research and I believe that I understand what is being proposed.

I understand that my personal involvement and my particular data from this study will remain strictly confidential. Any reference to myself will be coded and information which might identify me as a participant will not be used in order to ensure my anonymity.

I have been informed about what the data collected in this investigation will be used for, to whom it may be disclosed, and how long it will be retained.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study **at any time**, without giving a reason for withdrawing.

I agree for the interview being audio recorded. I hereby fully and freely consent to participate in the study.

Participant's Name: (Block Capitals) .....

Participant's Signature: .....

Date: .....

As the researcher responsible for this study I confirm that I have explained to the participant named above the nature and purpose of the research to be undertaken.

Researcher's Name: .....

Researcher's Signature: .....

Date: .....