



Why adults become Catholics

A qualitative research study in the
Catholic Diocese of East Anglia

Summary Report

(The full research report can be found at
www.rcdea.org.uk)

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Introduction

The decline in church attendance and the increasing numbers of those identifying as having no religious faith at all is well established in census and survey data. This is true of the Catholic Church in the UK too. Despite these trends there are still a significant number of adults who, counter-culturally, choose to become a Catholic. In the Roman Catholic Diocese of East Anglia on average 65 adults join Church each year.

It is of interest, therefore, to inquire what the factors are that cause individual adults to decide to become a Catholic and whether answers to this question have any practical application for those involved in evangelisation initiatives. The Diocesan Commission for the New Evangelisation undertook a research study to investigate these questions.

Methodology

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.

This was a qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews of around one hour duration were carried out with ten individuals to explore these issues. Five of the study participants were males and five females. Their average age was 45 years. They were drawn from seven different parishes across the Diocese. The interviews were audio recorded and verbatim typescripts were produced. The typescripts were then systematically analysed using a process of thematic analysis.

Results

Analysis of the data identified six over-arching themes associated with study participants' decisions to become a Catholic. Each theme is summarised below:-

1. *Spiritual restlessness*

All participants experienced a 'spiritual restlessness' whereby they appeared to be searching for an outlet for an intrinsic feeling of spirituality. This was a specifically spiritual or religious restlessness rather than a general unease with their lives. Importantly spiritual restlessness was accompanied by a deliberate quest for this to be resolved.

An important feature of the experience of spiritual restlessness in this study was that it was very protracted, sometimes extending over many years. The same 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. Several participants reported a lack of fulfilment with their previous spiritual attachment. The phrase “*something was missing*” frequently recurred. 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*”.

2. Intellectually driven

Accompanying participants’ 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.

Participants demonstrated an impressive understanding of church history, Catholic practices and Catholic doctrine. 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 a matter of intellectual curiosity, 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 study participants.

A significant source of Catholic formation for the participants in this study, across all ages, was social media outlets, in particular YouTube channels. 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.

All but one of the participants eventually took part in a parish RCIA programme. 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.

3. Affective attachment

As one participant observed, “*intellectual drivers might take you there but the spiritual and emotional connection keeps you there*”. At various points in the process to become a

Catholic participants experienced particular moments of being profoundly moved in a deep spiritual sense. For example, “*an overwhelming sense of security and reassurance*”, “*a feeling of enormous comfort*”, a sudden enveloping sensation of “*God’s love - a golden moment*”.

Intellectual drivers ultimately interacted with such affective experiences which appeared to act as catalysts in an individual’s journey 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.

4. Serial illuminations

Participants’ 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.

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. 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.

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

5. Discovery of reverence

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 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. This was most notably associated with experiencing the Mass and, what might be regarded as their most significant ‘illumination’, appreciation of the Eucharist. Reverence was not confined to Catholic Church practices but was, in some cases, also discovered within individual Catholics and how they conducted themselves outside of the Mass. The experience of reverence appeared to evolve from an influential

appreciation to become an essential need in addressing participants' own resolution of their spiritual restlessness.

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 internal 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. However, in the latter phases of participants' journeys towards the Catholic Church key individuals did indeed 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 usually the study participant who initiated the approach.

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", "bewildering", uncertainty about "not knowing what to do", and feeling out of place if "no one spoke to me". Yet the Mass was frequently cited as a highly 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.

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.

Conclusions

Analysis of the interviews in this study suggests that the process for an adult deciding to become a Catholic is a largely self-initiated, 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, a series of spiritually rich experiences, and timely significant relationship encounters. All of these factors have a cumulative effect over an extended period of time.

The finding that adults' decisions to become a Catholic involves a complex process that is of lengthy duration is consistent with other research studies. 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.

It is noteworthy 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.

Some implications for evangelisation

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, experience and expertise.

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. 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 aware of the characteristics of this group and to be able to respond positively and pro-actively in meeting their particular formation needs, 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. At this stage 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 a Catholic. Participants in this study, with only one exception, found the RCIA programme a positive and beneficial experience. This appeared in large part because it linked them up with a Catholic community and with others making similar decisions 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.

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 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 recommendations in this area.

Whilst the intellectual dimension was common across participants, 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, the Easter Triduum services, 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 optimal 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.