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# Highly religious young Catholics in Northern Ireland: Renewing the Catholic landscape?

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## Abstract

This article explores findings from a 2022 survey of students associated with the Catholic Chaplaincy at Queen's University, Belfast. It is the first study to investigate the beliefs, practices, and experiences of highly religious young Catholics in Northern Ireland. It presents survey findings on beliefs, practices, and influences on faith; dynamics of increased religiosity; and views on Church teachings on same sex relationships, euthanasia, sexual relationships, and abortion. Women are more likely to disagree with Church teachings on these issues than men. The survey confirms the importance of family socialization but finds that a substantial minority experience religious change at university. Respondents prioritize renewal but disagree on how to prompt it: some advocate greater 'openness' to women, LGBTQ+, and others perceived as marginalized; and others feel 'evangelization' should be emphasized. 'Post-secular Catholicism' is used as a foundation for reflections on religious persistence among Northern Ireland's young Catholics, raising questions about their potential role in renewing Ireland's Catholic landscape in light of the synodal process underway in the Church.

## KEYWORDS

Catholicism, Northern Ireland, post-Catholic, post-secular, secularization, synodality

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION: YOUNG CATHOLICS IN A 'POST-CATHOLIC' IRELAND

Since the 1990s belief and practice have declined dramatically on the island of Ireland, especially among young people. Yet the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, a region of the United Kingdom, remain among the most religious parts of Europe (Ganiel, 2021a). Northern Ireland has higher levels of religiosity than the Republic, a multi-faceted phenomenon that may be linked to its history of conflict, where protagonists identified along political-ethnic-religious lines (Ganiel, 2021a; Todd, 2018). Even after the 1998 peace agreement that is considered the end of Northern Ireland's Troubles, the strength of this identification has been such that it is commonly assumed that all those who identify with Unionism (and wish for Northern Ireland to remain in the UK) are Protestants and all those who identify with Nationalism (and aspire for a united Ireland) are Catholics. So, in Northern Ireland, for some people religious identification may be a political act rather than a faith-based response, artificially inflating religious identification (McGarry & O'Leary, 1995).<sup>1</sup>

But while the island is geographically divided it is ecclesiastically united: all the Christian churches are organized on a cross-border basis. The all-island nature of the churches means that it is appropriate to situate this study of young Catholics in Northern Ireland within research on the island as a whole, where the Catholic Church is the largest denomination. In the Republic, 78% identified as Catholic in the 2016 Census, while Catholics comprised 42% of the population in Northern Ireland's 2021 Census. The 2021 Census marked the first time in Northern Ireland's 100-year history that there were more people who were Catholic or brought up Catholic than Protestant (46% vs. 43%).

Despite these seemingly strong trends of Catholic identification, the island has been described as 'post-Catholic' (Ganiel, 2016). The term is not meant to imply that the island was once Catholic and now is not. Rather, it is a description of trends that include the demise of particular forms of Catholicism: in the Republic, a 'monopoly' Catholicism that had strong links to the state, was a defining characteristic of national identity, elevated clerics, and emphasized sexual sins (Inglis, 1998, 2014); and in Northern Ireland, an institutionally strong Catholicism which partially defined Nationalist identity and structured communal life in a context where Protestants/Unionists long exercised power (Elliot, 2009; Mitchell, 2006). Since the 1990s the Church has been rocked by clerical sexual abuse scandals. These have been more far-reaching in the Republic, where the state had granted the Church exceptional powers to provide education and health care. The fall-out has produced a 'national and ecclesial trauma' (O'Regan, 2013)<sup>2</sup>; with those who say they have 'no religion' (10%) often basing this identification on a moral critique of the Church and its failings (Turpin, 2022). Accordingly, post-Catholic includes a *shift in consciousness* in which the Church is no longer held in high esteem, including by practising Catholics. Such sentiments were captured in an Iona Institute poll, which found that 47% in the Republic had an unfavourable view of the Church (20% of weekly Mass-goers); with 22% agreeing that they would be happy if the Catholic Church disappeared from Ireland (Iona Institute, 2011).

In the Republic, referenda to remove the constitutional ban on abortion (2018) and to legalize same sex marriage (2015) reflected the weakness of the Church's influence on society. Mass attendance declined from around 90% in the 1970s to 66% in 1997 to 35% in 2016 (Breen, 2017; Breen & Healy, 2014). Secularizing trends correlate with the economic growth of the Celtic Tiger, and the fall-out from the abuse scandals (Donnelly & Inglis, 2010). In Northern Ireland, Church attendance has dropped since the 1998 peace agreement. Among Catholics, attendance fell from 95% weekly in 1968 to monthly rates of 81% (1998) and 46% (2019); while among Protestants, weekly attendance was 45% in 1968, with monthly rates of 52% in 1998 and 46% in 2019 (Ganiel, 2021a). During the Covid-19 pandemic, churches moved services online (Ganiel, 2021b). But since lockdown restrictions have been removed, many have not resumed in-person worship. The Iona Institute (2020) found that up to a fifth of Mass-goers in the Republic were unsure whether they would ever return. Indeed, Brian Conway (2022) has argued that greater 'religious-secular competition' for people's attention has resulted in the Irish increasingly choosing secular pursuits. This process is especially advanced among the young, 'who have little or no experience of a pre-scandal Church', making it 'difficult to see how the Church could be 'rescued' from growing cultural indifference, even hostility, toward it' (Conway, 2022, p. 142). Yet a Pew study revealed that the Republic was Western Europe's third most 'religiously observant' country, with 24% showing 'high levels of religious commitment' according to an index including frequency of attendance, frequency of prayer, importance of religion in one's life, and belief in God (Pew, 2018).

Across Europe and North America, young people are less likely than older generations to practice religion. Teenagers have somewhat higher levels of practice than young adults (19–25 years), reflecting parental influence. Stephen Bullivant's (2018a) study based on 2014–2016 European Social Survey data found 16–29-year-olds in the Republic ranked as the fourth most religious in Europe. Among Catholics, 24% attended Church weekly and 31% prayed weekly. Fifty-four percent identified as Catholic and 39% as 'no religion'. This contrasts to the general population in the 2016 Census, where 78% identified as Catholic and just 10% as no religion. Among 15–19-year-olds, 79% identified as Catholic, but Catholic identification was lower among the 20–24 (69%), 25–29 (66%), and 30–34 (70%) age groups; while about 15% of those 15–34 identified as no religion.<sup>3</sup>

In other studies of teens and young adults, geography (north and south) and gender have emerged as key points of difference. By most indicators, young people in Northern Ireland are more religious than those in the Republic. Among young Catholics, women in Northern Ireland are the most religious of all, conforming to international trends in which Christian women are more religious than men (Devine, 2013; Voas & Chaves, 2016). But in the Republic, females and males exhibit similar levels of religiosity, an unusual trend that may be linked to perceptions that the Catholic Church in Ireland has treated women especially badly. For example, a 2010 study found 74% of Irish Catholic women believed that the Church did not treat them with 'a lot of respect', compared to just 6% of Protestant women in the Republic (Craven, 2010; Ganiel 2021c).

Leslie Francis et al.'s (2019a) analysis of a 2003 survey of 16–19-year-olds in the Republic<sup>4</sup> found no differences in belief in God: 73% of females and 72% of males believed; while females were more likely to pray daily (33% vs. 23%) (McGrady et al., 2019, p. 175). But females were less likely than males to attend Mass weekly (35% vs. 50%) and much less likely to regard religion in Ireland as positive (24% vs. 40%) (McGrady et al., 2019, p. 179).

In 2017, Barna surveyed 14–25-year-olds in the Republic, in partnership with the organization Christ in Youth.<sup>5</sup> The Barna report does not always break down the data between Catholics, Protestants, and other religions, but given the Republic's demographics, the category of practising Christians is likely mostly Catholic. Barna found that 88% of Irish youth were either nominal Christians (63%) or had no religion (25%); and that one in four were going through a crisis of faith. Using an index including those who identify as Christian, say their faith is very important, and have attended a religious service in the last month, Barna (2017, p. 8) concluded that 31% of teens and 20% of young adults are practising Christians. Among practising Catholics, 31% had attended church in the last week (Barna, 2017, p. 20). Barna also found significant dissent from the Church's teachings on sexual issues. Among practising Christians, 69 percent at least partially agreed that they personally can't live by the Church's teaching on sexuality (29% said this was completely true); while 79% at least partially agreed that they think the Church's teachings on sexuality and homosexuality are wrong (37% said this was completely true) (Barna, 2017, p. 36). Barna did not present data around gender differences.

Francis et al.'s (2019b) analysis of a 2011 survey among sixth-form pupils in Northern Ireland and Senior Cycle students in the Republic (ages 14–17) allows for cross-border comparisons.<sup>6</sup> They concluded that 'there are few significant differences' between Catholics north and south (Francis, McGrady, Williams, & McKenna, 2019, pp. 98–99). There was most convergence on questions about 'moral values' like gambling, drunkenness, smoking, lying, stealing, and use of nuclear weapons (Francis, McGrady, Williams, & McKenna, 2019, pp. 93–97). But in aspects related to personal religious practices, Catholics in Northern Ireland exhibited much higher levels of religiosity. Catholic females in the Republic did not engage in these practices more than males, but in Northern Ireland females were more religious according to these measures (Table 1).

Patricia Kieran and Aiveen Mullally's (2022) study on 'lived Catholicism' among postgraduate student teachers in Catholic colleges of education in the Republic found considerable fluidity in beliefs and practices.<sup>8</sup> While 99% had been initiated into the Church as children, 58% identified as Catholic with 31% attached rather or very strongly to their belief and 24% attending Mass monthly or more (Kieran & Mullally, 2022, pp. 60–62). At the same time, more believed in energy (53%) and souls (53%) than in One God (39%) and the Holy Spirit (37%) (Kieran & Mullally, 2022, p. 64). Others believed in 'reincarnation and gods, psychics, chi and chakras' alongside more conventional Catholic beliefs (Kieran & Mullally, 2022, p. 65). For those who had disaffiliated from Catholicism, 69% did so

TABLE 1 Religious practices of young Catholics<sup>7</sup>

|   | Republic of Ireland female | Northern Ireland female | Republic of Ireland male | Northern Ireland male |
|---|----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Weekly mass attendance                      | 24%                        | 46%                     | 25%                      | 39%                   |
| Personal prayer daily                       | 17%                        | 24%                     | 13%                      | 17%                   |
| Never read the bible                        | 93%                        | 79%                     | 92%                      | 84%                   |
| Complete & partial belief in god            | 57%                        | 70%                     | 53%                      | 58%                   |
| Study of the bible has been helpful in life | 24%                        | 55%                     | 27%                      | 45%                   |

'because religion did not address their experiences and needs', while 91% said that the sexual abuse of children by religious was very or somewhat important in why they left (Kieran & Mullally, 2022, p. 64).

These studies emphasize decline; indeed, the Barna report was released with the headline: 'The Faith Crisis of Today's Irish Youth'.<sup>9</sup> Yet some of the data shed light on religious persistence amid decline, confirming the importance of parents and family for influencing the faith of young Catholics. Byrne et al. (2019, p. 236) found that the most important predictors for youth Mass attendance were parental attendance; bolstered by talking about religion with their mothers (though not their fathers). When Barna (2017) asked 'Which influences make Christianity more appealing?', the top answers among practising Christians were Church (74%), Mum (73%); Minister, Pastor or Priest (62%); Dad (52%), and Other Relative (46%).

There have been few studies of religious persistence in Ireland since the 1990s, with the field dominated by the study of secularization (Ganiel, 2022). This is even the case in the 'more religious' Northern Ireland, where most studies have been concerned with religion's role in conflict and peacebuilding (Altglas, 2022; Brewer et al., 2011).<sup>10</sup> Given Northern Ireland's relatively high levels of religiosity, it may seem surprising that we know so little about the dynamics of religious persistence. While there has been some research on the religious practices and beliefs of Protestant evangelicals (Mitchell and Ganiel, 2011; Mitchell & Tilly, 2004); and a study of the links between prayer and purpose in life among 13–15-year-old Catholics and Protestants (Robbins & Francis, 2005), research on 'everyday religion' and religious experience has been neglected, especially among Catholics (Ganiel, 2022). Indeed, research among young people in Northern Ireland does not usually include religiosity, even when identifying research subjects by religious labels (Smith, 2018), but rather has explored issues such as trust, risk, relationships with the 'other', peacebuilding, and how young people navigate segregated spaces (Browne & Dwyer, 2014; Leonard, 2006; McEvoy, 2000). This means we lack empirical information about what it is like to be a highly religious young Catholic in Northern Ireland, including how and how often they engage in religious practices, how important their faith is in relation to other areas of their lives, how their family socialization may differ from their less-religious peers, and how they experience life as a self-consciously 'religious' person in a secularizing society. Our study is the first to investigate the beliefs, practices, and experiences of highly religious young Catholics in Northern Ireland and, as such, begins to address some of those gaps. It highlights the importance of family socialization, experiences of religious change at university, gender differences, and dissent from Church teachings.

## 2 | METHODS

This study is based on an action research project with the Catholic Chaplaincy at Queen's. Its aims are: (1) to capture a range of Catholic student perspectives on religion and beliefs; (2) to investigate students' awareness and experiences of chaplaincy; and (3) to help chaplaincy improve its services. This article explores findings associated with the first aim. It is partially modelled on studies of 'Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England' (Guest et al., 2013) and the Church of England's 'Chaplains on Campus' study (Aune et al., 2019).<sup>11</sup>

The primary method of data collection was an online survey, administered 10–21 February 2022. The chaplaincy sent a request to complete it to the 4498 students who had consented to its email list. There were pre-coded

questions on various topics, plus opportunities for free-text, 'write-in' responses. There were 211 useable responses, with a low response rate of 4.7%, which means results should be read with caution.<sup>12</sup> The principal investigator also conducted four semi-structured interviews with young Catholics (two women and two men), June/July 2022. Four is a very small sample and participants cannot be regarded as representative. But given that there have been no previous studies focusing on the lived religion/religious experiences of young Catholics in Northern Ireland, these interviews were intended to be exploratory, identifying areas of investigation for future research. Quotes from the interviews are included in this article to highlight areas of interest. Interviewees were sourced via an email from the chaplaincy requesting volunteers (two interviewees) and through the principal investigator's personal contacts (two interviewees). Three of the four had already completed their studies and one was a graduate student. Three were under the age of 26 and one was 34. One was born and raised outside Northern Ireland.

Survey respondents were young (78% 18–25 and a further 11% 26–35)<sup>13</sup> and highly religious. The survey's conception of 'highly religious' is limited, in that it is largely based on people's willingness to consent for their email address to be forwarded to the Catholic Chaplaincy. In Northern Ireland, it may be the case that students from a Catholic background more willingly identify with a chaplaincy than students in other regions, given the history of the entanglement of Catholicism with national and political identity. At the same time, 76% of respondents attend Church while at university, which is much higher than the 35% of 18–34-year-olds (Catholic and Protestant combined) who reported monthly or more Church attendance in the 2019 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. In the Life and Times, among Catholics, attendance was 37% among 18–24-year-olds ( $N = 68$ ) and 23% among 25–34-year-olds ( $N = 57$ ). While attendance at services is not a proxy for religiosity, it can be an important aspect of it and the relatively high attendance rate of respondents suggests that they can be considered highly religious when compared to their peers. Finally, respondents are highly educated, by virtue of being in third-level education. As Mathew Guest and Kristin Aune (2017) have shown, the often privileged, middle-class position of Christian students at English universities shapes their aspirations for their faith and lives in ways not available to other young people. These aspects of the sample mean that the study gives us limited perspectives on highly religious young Catholics in Northern Ireland. It is confined to a particular student strand and thereby misses Catholic students who do not associate with chaplaincy at Queen's. It neglects the perspectives of young Catholics at other third-level educational institutions, as well as young Catholics outside third-level education. These young Catholics may have different perspectives and experiences, so we must be clear that our sample is narrowly defined and cannot be generalised beyond the select subgroup on which it is based.

Sixty-two percent of respondents were women, 36% men, and 1% wrote in other gender categories.<sup>14</sup> Seventy-two percent chose Irish as their national identity, followed by Northern Irish (17%). There were respondents from every School in the university. Undergraduates made up the bulk of respondents (17% First Year, 27% Second Year, and 22% Third Year), with Post-Graduate Taught students 18% and Post-Graduate Research students 16%.

### 3 | BELIEFS, PRACTICES, AND INFLUENCES ON FAITH

When asked, 'Which of the following most closely represents your understanding of God?', respondents displayed traditional Christian understandings, with 42% saying that 'God is three in one' and 36% saying that 'God is personal rather than impersonal'. Fourteen percent said 'I am not sure', while 7% said 'God is an impersonal life force', and 2% said 'there is definitely no God'. In this area, it seems that highly religious young Catholics conform to traditional Trinitarian teachings as well as a post-Vatican II emphasis on a personal God. In addition, 56% considered themselves 'religious', 19% were 'spiritual but not religious', 12% were not sure, 10% were 'religious but not spiritual', and 4% were 'not religious or spiritual'.

We also found that the university experience could prompt change in religious practices. While 94% had attended Church prior to university, 76% said they attended Church while at university (72% of women and 84% of men). This was not because they were attending other (Protestant) churches (less than 1%); rather, 24% were not attending Church at all (28% of women and 16% of men).

TABLE 2 Influences on thinking about faith, spirituality, religion, or god

| Influence   | Very important/Somewhat important |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Personal experience and reflection                            | 95%                               |
| Family  | 84%                               |
| Local religious leader (i.e., priest, minister, pastor)       | 80%                               |
| The traditions of my Church or faith community                | 80%                               |
| The pope  | 75%                               |
| Friends   | 71%                               |
| University Chaplain   | 66%                               |
| Books about faith, spirituality, religion or god              | 65%                               |
| The bible   | 62%                               |
| Online resources about faith, spirituality, religion or god   | 61%                               |
| Reason and scholarship  | 56%                               |
| National-level faith leaders (i.e., archbishop, bishop, etc.) | 49%                               |
| International faith/religious leaders other than the pope     | 45%                               |

Respondents' attendance also declined when Church buildings were closed during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 and services were only available online. Thirty-three percent never accessed services online. Fifty-two percent accessed services online at least once a month, with 24% of those accessing once per week.<sup>15</sup> The use of digital resources among young Catholics during and after lockdowns could be investigated in future research, as even our small number of exploratory interviews revealed diverse perspectives. For example, one interviewee discovered a whole new world of Catholic resources online, which she continues to use:

I didn't even know churchservices.tv existed beforehand, and then it was a bit of a revelation. ... [Online resources are] great because it's allowed you to find ... dare I say priests and parishes that are more in tune with my desired practice.

In contrast, another almost never accessed Mass online:

I wasn't a big fan of the online Mass to be honest. I was just desperate to get back to Mass in person. When Mass came back that summer I remember running to Mass—I was doing a morning run and I said, 'Well, I'm going to do my morning run to the chapel.' And then I went to Mass and I walked home.

Respondents also were asked about influences on their thinking about faith, spirituality, religion, or God, and given a range of options. 'Personal experience and reflection' was by far the most popular option, with 95% indicating that it was very important/somewhat important. The emphasis on personal experience and reflection echoes wider international trends of what has been described as religious individualization (Beck, 2010), where institutions are regarded as less important than experiences in shaping people's religious lives.

At the same time, the importance of family socialization was confirmed. Just 4% indicated that they are the only person who practises Christianity in their family. Moreover, in a question about influences, the second most popular option was family (84% very important/somewhat important) (Table 2).

Interviewees also spoke about the importance of parental religious practice, indicating that the dynamics of family socialization should be considered in future research. One woman said:

I don't ever remember my parents missing Mass. ... My mum worked night shifts and would have come off night shift and went to Mass before going to bed the next day. There was no such thing as, 'I'm too tired'.

While she described herself as 'going through the motions' of faith as a teenager, she said that 'the example that my mum set was profound' and she found herself turning to faith during a mental health crisis in her early twenties: 'I suppose her devotion was admirable, and even in my doubts I wanted to follow that.'

Another woman grew up in what in Northern Ireland is known as a 'mixed' marriage: between a Catholic and a Protestant. Her family alternated attendance at Catholic and Protestant churches:

My parents placed a high importance on religion. ... They mostly brought us up as Catholics—so I went to Catholic primary school and did the sacraments there—but for a number of years we would every other week go to [a Protestant] service. ... That put those questions in my mind, and placed high importance on them. I would have considered questions of faith very worthy of consideration, worthy of my time.

Given that previous research has emphasized parental/family influence, these findings are expected. Highly religious young Catholics continue in their faith at least in part because family socialization continues to be significant, even in a secularizing society.

#### 4 | DYNAMICS OF INCREASED RELIGIOSITY

Young adulthood is often experienced as a time of exploration and change (Katz et al., 2021). For those in third-level education, the university experience can be a key period for questioning and development (Guest et al., 2013). While not investigating the impact of the university experience on faith, Barna (2017) found that young people's religiosity declined between the ages of 19–25 when compared to 14–18. Our survey probed whether or to what extent students had experienced religious change, and in what directions (more religious or less religious).

Stability in religious or spiritual identity and practices was the norm, but there was considerable flux. Seventy-five percent reported that their current religious or spiritual identity is the one they have always had, while 11% said they experienced a definite turning point when they made a decision to follow their religion. A further 7% said they could remember a time when they did not follow a religion, but their religious identity has developed gradually; 6% said they had a turning point when they decided *not* to follow their religion, and less than 1% had never been religious. Women demonstrated more stability, with 81% reporting that their current identity is the one they had always had, compared to 68% of men. Nineteen percent of men said they had experienced a definite turning point when they made a decision to follow their religion, compared to 5% of women.

We also asked whether or to what extent people's religious perspectives had changed since attending university. Fifty-three percent said that 'my perspective has generally stayed the same', 25% had become more religious, 19% had become less religious, and 3% were unsure. Again, women displayed greater stability, with 60% reporting that they had stayed the same, compared to 43% of men. Men were also more likely to become more religious, with 34% of men and 20% of women saying they had become more religious. Twenty percent of men and 18% of women said they had become less religious.

Our interviews explored how young people became more religious, highlighting factors and experiences that pulled people toward faith, and thereby providing a starting point of investigation for further research in this area. One woman began to have doubts about God's existence when she was 15. She also disagreed with Church teachings like transubstantiation, which she described as 'very illogical'; and Church stances on LGBTQ+ issues and women priests. Yet while at university she went on a pilgrimage abroad, 'even though I didn't really believe in it ... because lots of people were going that I knew.' There, she met someone who told her about the Queen's chaplaincy. She said, 'I had no intention of going, but 1 day I just popped in and ended up meeting people.' She began to engage with her new friends as well as the chaplain, asking lots of questions. She was surprised she was not 'fobbed off with poor answers.' She was especially impressed with the chaplain's explanation of transubstantiation, which drew on the philosophical



distinction between 'substance' and 'accidents'. She continued to attend chaplaincy events where questions were explored. She now agrees with Church teachings on many of the issues she would have disagreed with as a teenager.

One of the men also described his journey into faith as an intellectual process. He admitted, 'I had drifted into right-wing politics, watching American and British YouTube videos about the problems with the political left.' He found an article online from the website *First Things*, written by Patrick Deneen, a political theorist and professor at the University of Notre Dame. He then read Deneen's 2018 book *Why Liberalism Failed*. Liberalism in this case is not liberalism associated with the left, but rather the centuries-old liberal political tradition. He said:

I read that book and it changed my life. I was convinced that the false dichotomy of right/left was no longer valid. However, I didn't have a response to it. Then I found out that Patrick Deneen was a Catholic and thought maybe his political ideology is coming from this.

He added that, 'Chaplaincy has been good because there are some people there engaged with faith on an intellectual level.'

Another man attended Mass regularly during his first years in university, but 'I wouldn't really have had many Catholic friends. I would have used chaplaincy for Mass and that would have been it.' He was engaging less as his studies became more challenging, reaching a low point in his faith just before the pandemic:

Then Covid came and my degree stopped, my job stopped, seeing my friends stopped, seeing my girlfriend stopped. It all stopped. And it left me in an awful way, and that's when [ever] I came back to God.

When lockdown restrictions were eased in summer 2020, he went on a 3-day retreat with 11 other young people:

I was starting to think more about [God and faith during lockdown] but then someone messaged me and asked me to go on a retreat. ... For the first time I had Catholic friends that were a really good influence on me, and I am someone who's quite influenced by my friends. So then when I went back for my final year at university, it became an objective for me to make myself known around the chaplaincy to seek friendships.

At the retreat he also learned 'good practical things that I should do' such as structuring his day around prayer and remaining committed to Mass attendance. He now has a group of friends who encourage him in those practices.

Another woman, who characterized her Catholic upbringing as strict, described herself as questioning her faith as an undergraduate. Her doubts coincided with a period of mental health issues. When she returned to university for graduate studies she began to participate in a women's group in the chaplaincy. The small group met informally once a week for tea, conversation, and prayer, and included women with a range of views, from conservative to charismatic. The friendships she developed encouraged her in regular practices of prayer and introduced her to new resources, such as podcasts, that helped strengthen her faith.

In sum, our survey confirmed that university can be a period of change for substantial minorities of young Catholics, with the interviews shedding light on the dynamics of change among those who become more religious. For them, it was important to have a faith that was intellectually stimulating; and to be part of a supportive peer group of other highly religious young Catholics.

## 5 | CHURCH TEACHINGS ON MORAL ISSUES

The survey asked about various moral issues on which the Catholic Church has taken stances at odds with wider societal opinion.<sup>16</sup> Most of our highly religious young Catholics did not align with official Church teachings but rather reflect more liberal views on same sex relationships, euthanasia, sexual relationships, and abortion (although opinions on abortion were more mixed). Women were much more likely to disagree with Church teachings.

TABLE 3 Views on abortion

|   | All | Women | Men |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| It is always wrong  | 25% | 17%   | 39% |
| Restricted to exceptional circumstances   | 20% | 20%   | 19% |
| Available to all women who choose, subject to medical profession's ethical guidelines | 28% | 40%   | 23% |
| Available to all women, whatever the circumstances                                    | 22% | 26%   | 17% |
| Not sure  | 5%  | 6%    | 3%  |

Sixty-five percent said that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are 'not wrong at all' (74% of women and 50% of men), with 18% indicating that they are 'always wrong' (33% of men and 11% of women). On open-ended write-in questions, some respondents raised LGBTQ+ issues. For example, a second-year male undergraduate wrote:

... I think the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality and the Christian view of homosexuality is largely wrong. To say something which wasn't morally acceptable 2000 years ago and applying that to the modern day is outrageous. ... To say that homosexuality is wrong is to say that when God created mankind he somehow made a mistake when he made people who were homosexual or part of the LGBTQ+ umbrella.

And a post-graduate student wrote:

I am a gay white Catholic man. I feel gay Catholic men in Northern Ireland often feel ashamed of who they are and this is a shame. I am able to be who I am but many are not, particularly ones I have met in my time at Queen's. ... Being Catholic is all about my own connection with God and my faith. I agree with the moral guidance of love one another and help each other. But to specify individual practices I feel is wrong and makes me disengage with the Catholic faith where I have been quite religious.

When asked if people who are terminally ill should be legally permitted to take their own lives, 44% strongly agreed/agreed (46% of women/39% of men), 36% strongly disagreed/disagreed (46% of men/32% of women) and 20% were not sure (22% of women/16% of men). These findings are striking, given the Church's strong stance against euthanasia.

A majority of respondents (55%, including 62% of women and 44% of men) said that their attitude to sexual intercourse is that it is 'a matter of individual choice'. Twenty-three percent indicated that it should be confined to marriage (36% of men/16% of women), 17% said it is morally acceptable outside of marriage, so long as it only happens within a committed relationship (13% of men/18% of women), and 5% were unsure. Again, these findings are striking, given the Church's strong stance against sex outside of marriage.

Attitudes about abortion were mixed, with men more likely to agree abortion is always wrong. Twenty-five percent indicated that 'it is always wrong' while 20% said it should be restricted to exceptional circumstances, such as rape or the imminent death of the mother. Together these two options were chosen by 45% of respondents (37% of women/58% of men). Twenty-eight percent said that abortion should be available to women who choose it, so long as it is subject to the ethical guidelines issued by the medical profession, while 22% said it should be available to all women, whatever the circumstances. Together these two options were chosen by 50% of respondents (57% of women/40% of men), demonstrating disagreement with Church teachings about abortion (Table 3).

These findings are unsurprising, because other studies have demonstrated that young Irish Catholics (Barna, 2017), as well as Catholics across all age groups, are out of step with Church teachings in these and other areas (Anderson, 2010; Ó Féich & O'Connell, 2015). Tension between official Church teachings and the beliefs of practising Catholics is common throughout the West (Bullivant, 2018b; Dillon, 2018).

## 6 | DESIRE FOR RENEWAL: 'OPENNESS' AND EVANGELIZATION

There was evidence from the survey that highly religious young Catholics want renewal. As a female post-graduate student wrote:

I am worried regarding the decline in faith in our own local parish and throughout Ireland. I wonder what way to engage young people, like myself, who have faith but struggle with some of the hardline beliefs required in Catholicism. I have doubts and it is uncomfortable to raise these, but I do believe in God and want to live by Jesus.

Respondents seemed to see renewal coming either through more openness (often to liberalizing trends) or better evangelization—or sometimes both. Yet there was an underlying tension in responses: those who wrote of 'openness' seemed to endorse a more 'liberal' form of Catholicism in which traditional Church teachings on issues like LGBTQ+ inclusion, abortion, and the role of women should be not just topics of conversation but could, perhaps, be changed; while those who emphasized traditional forms of evangelization often aligned with traditional or official Church teachings. Those who prioritized evangelization suggested more advertising about Mass on campus, talks on faith, Eucharistic processions, and even 'matchmaking for single Catholics'. Two of our interviewees spoke with approval of chaplaincy's decision to employ FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students) missionaries beginning in autumn 2022, hopeful that this would be a boost to evangelization.<sup>17</sup>

Some respondents felt chaplaincy did not welcome those with dissenting views on issues like abortion or LGBTQ+ inclusion, and some felt chaplaincy had become cold toward those who favored the Latin Mass or held more conservative views. A female interviewee worried that those with liberal views were being marginalized in the wider Church:

I worry about those of us who are in the Church who don't prescribe to more conservative elements. While there seems to be a large number of us we somehow are in the periphery of the active membership of the Church, and it is the conservative ones who are really having a say.

A male interviewee shared that one of his friends who attends chaplaincy 'just straight up said the chaplaincy is cursed because of unfriendliness toward people who are more traditionally minded'; while another friend, who is bi-sexual, wants to come back to chaplaincy but is nervous and 'probably wouldn't darken any church door even if they had a pride flag outside.' He added that it is very difficult to 'set up conversations' about LGBTQ+ issues:

I find it hard enough talking about it with just my normal friends—although I find that personal conversation helps more than setting up a big meeting. ... But I also know a few very faithful gay Catholics who don't like the obsessiveness with which this issue is dealt with.

While these perspectives may reflect how students experienced differing priorities of different chaplains in previous years, they also may simply reflect chaplaincy's attempts to navigate wider tensions in the Church.

## 7 | POST-SECULAR CATHOLICISM: RENEWING IRELAND'S CATHOLIC LANDSCAPE?

My previous framing of Ireland as 'post-Catholic' was influenced by Jurgen Habermas' (2008) concept of the 'post-secular'. Habermas did not argue that Europe was once secular and now is not. Rather, he claimed that public perceptions of religion had changed and that religious actors (who had never disappeared) should be regarded as valid conversation partners in democratic public spheres. In recent years, sociologists have employed the post-secular as

a concept to help explain religious change and persistence; as well as the participation of religious actors in public debates.

Michele Dillon (2018) builds on Habermas in her analysis of 'post-secular Catholicism' in the United States. Dillon sees post-secularism as providing challenges and opportunities for American Catholicism, arguing that post-secular sensibilities may offer avenues for a 'contrite' Church to contribute fruitfully to public debates. Her work is useful for reflecting on this study of young Catholics in Northern Ireland—though caution must be applied when using an analysis of American Catholicism to illuminate the Northern Ireland context. Indeed, Dillon (2014, p. 111) herself has argued that American Catholicism has been 'more resilient' than Irish Catholicism when faced with 'the forces of modernization, secularism and individualization and the priest sex abuse crisis'. For Dillon (2014, p. 119), a key difference between American and Irish Catholicism is that Americans have been better able to 'balance criticism of, with loyalty to, the Church and Catholicism', in part because in Ireland's clericalized Church the Vatican II 'idea of the Church as the 'People of God'—did not secure a foothold'. Yet I would argue that Catholicism in Northern Ireland seems more 'resilient' than in the Republic; similar to American Catholicism, the Church in Northern Ireland has not held a 'monopoly' position and this may have been important in establishing foundations for a relatively more resilient faith. Moreover, it is common for relatively high levels of religious vitality to persist in contexts where religion contributes to 'cultural defense' against oppositional 'others', as argued by David Martin (1978) and Steve Bruce (2002), among others. Although it has been more than 2 decades since the peace agreement, ethno-national divisions between 'Catholics' and 'Protestants' in Northern Ireland remain significant, and often oppositional (Todd, 2018).

Dillon's starting point is the post-secular emphasis on open dialogue among secular and religious partners. For her, post-secularity includes recognizing the importance of dialogue within the Church itself, as well as long-standing traditions of interpretive diversity within Catholicism. Dialogue within the Church has received a boost with Francis' papacy, a point made by Dillon but even further reinforced by the global Church's 2021–2023 'synod on synodality'. The synod on synodality is a process whereby bishops are consulting with priests and parishioners, including groups marginalized within the Church and those who disagree with Church teachings. While it is not expected to yield radical changes in Church teachings, the synod on synodality could be understood as Francis' effort to embed dialogue within Church structures.

Dillon (2018, p. 17ff) also establishes how 'interpretive autonomy is legitimated in Catholic teaching', through the importance placed on discernment and abiding by one's conscience. It is interpretive autonomy and flexibility, she argues, that 'preserves attachment to Catholicism' in the United States (Dillon, 2018, p. 20):

The typical self-identified Catholic, therefore, is one who disagrees with Church teaching on sexual and other issues and continues to stay Catholic. Such Catholics illuminate the postsecular reality: the (partial) failure of secularism (to displace faith), *and* the secularization of religion. The persistence of Catholicism as a meaningful religious tradition is largely because many Catholics are empowered to hold together faith and reason and lived experience, and thus to interpret and own Catholicism in ways at odds with official Church teaching.

In this description, it is easy to recognize many of the young Catholics in our study. Dillon (2018, p. 28) emphasizes that interpretive autonomy is 'a conscientious position of nonassent'. This claim is 'indirectly supported by the fact that it is college educated Catholics who are the most engaged in the Church', attending Mass more and receiving Eucharist more. In this light, the universities of Northern Ireland could be seedbeds for the development of interpretive autonomy within Irish Catholicism, if students have opportunities to engage intellectually with their faith. More research is necessary to ascertain whether or to what extent university experiences promote interpretive autonomy among Catholic students. Interview-based research in English universities has provided some evidence that (primarily Protestant) Christian students articulate aspirations that critique what they perceive as the dominant cultural value of consumerism, with these students' ability to do so related to their privileged, middle-class positions (Guest & Aune, 2017). This type of intellectual work of course critiques the wider culture, while the interpretive autonomy that Dillon presents critiques the Church itself.

At the same time, our survey revealed tensions among highly religious young Catholics, including between women and men; as well as between those who value 'openness' and those who place more value on the Church's traditional teachings. Given that women were more likely to disagree with Church teachings, it is possible that Northern Ireland's young Catholic women are better able than young men to balance tensions between commitment to Catholicism and disagreement with Church teachings. Perhaps more young Catholic men who disagree with Church teachings simply disengage with Catholicism; while women choose to remain and engage with liberalizing trends within the Church. With young Catholic women in the Republic more likely to disengage from faith rather than try and balance this tension, young Catholic women from Northern Ireland could be poised to be among those advocating for reforms in the Irish Church. It is unclear, however, if young Catholic women in Northern Ireland are being empowered or discouraged to play such a role, either through Church structures or related organizations, like chaplaincies.

Yet our research has shown that highly religious young Catholics want renewal, which they see coming through either more openness (often to liberalizing trends) or better evangelization—or sometimes both, even if some forms of openness and evangelization seem contradictory. Following Dillon's argument, post-secularity's emphasis on internal Church dialogue, now further undergirded by Francis' advocacy of synodality, could provide an opportunity for Northern Ireland's highly religious young Catholics to contribute to renewal.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

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### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A full discussion of Northern Ireland's conflict, including links between religion, identity, and politics, is beyond the scope of this article. While this literature is vast, Ruane and Todd (1996), Mitchell (2006), Elliott (2009), Brewer et al. (2011), Ruane (2021), and Altglas (2022) provide useful starting points.
- <sup>2</sup> Conway and Spruyt (2018) did not find significant relationships between abuse scandals and declines in attendance in Catholic countries, though qualitative research has hinted at this possibility in Ireland (Ganiel, 2022, pp. 67–68).
- <sup>3</sup> The 2016 Irish Census asked, 'what is your religion?' This likely primed people to choose a religion rather than no religion, helping explain why other surveys have found more people of 'no religion.'
- <sup>4</sup> The sample size was 2774 and drawn from 64 Catholic schools.
- <sup>5</sup> The survey had a nationally representative sample of 750 with a further 40 who were involved in church activities recruited to complete it (Barna, 2017, p. 6).
- <sup>6</sup> The sample size was 3015 in the Republic and 1624 in Northern Ireland (Francis, McGrady, Williams, & McKenna, 2019, p. 78).
- <sup>7</sup> Table adapted from Francis, McGrady, Williams, and McKenna (2019, 86–91).
- <sup>8</sup> Kieran and Mullally received 192 survey responses (88 percent female, reflecting the gender profile of Ireland's teaching profession) with 64 percent aged 18–24 and 31 percent aged 25–34).

- <sup>9</sup> The Faith Crisis of Today's Irish Youth - Barna Group, accessed 11 July 2022.
- <sup>10</sup> See exceptions to this trend (Ganiel, 2022, p. 71).
- <sup>11</sup> We thank the authors of these studies for providing advice on research design and sharing their question guides. We replicated some questions from their surveys.
- <sup>12</sup> Two-hundred-and-three identified as Catholic, four as 'none', two as Protestant, and two skipped the question.
- <sup>13</sup> Twenty-two percent were 36 or older. When we controlled for age, there were not significant differences between those younger and older than 36. Our analysis uses the full sample of 211 respondents.
- <sup>14</sup> We allowed respondents to write in their gender identity. We combined a variety of answers under the 'women' and 'men' categories, including female, male, cisgender female, etc. This may fail to capture all the fine-grained nuances of gender identification (Katz et al., 2021).
- <sup>15</sup> In contrast, the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey found that just 12 percent of Catholics aged 18–34 accessed services online two to three times per month or more during the pandemic (Ganiel & Morris, 2021).
- <sup>16</sup> Guest et al. (2013, p. 151) also asked questions about these issues, describing them as 'moral issues'. While there are of course other issues that can be considered 'moral', such as wealth redistribution or nuclear disarmament, we follow Guest et al.'s convention with our terminology.
- <sup>17</sup> See Dugan (2018) on FOCUS missionaries on American campuses.

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