

kind of “ecclesiodicy” to those who think with the Church, to theologians. They ask not only how it is that theologians can stay Catholic, but how it is that the Catholic experiences of victims-survivors came to be subtracted from what counts as church life and Catholic identity. A post-Catholic theologian could thus paradoxically be closer to lived Catholicism than those who refuse to imagine themselves as deconverted.

Post-Catholic theologians can serve Catholicism, then, in several ways: they can conceptualize the (common) deconversion passage through or out of Catholicism; they can support students and pastoral workers in living and working with integrity; and they can help Catholicism to tell more of the truth about itself. These are all ways of “serving the Church,” and of teaching theology in an atmosphere of deconversion.

TOM BEAUDOIN
Fordham University

II. Deconversion: What, Who, Why, How?

In March 2013, a report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life announced that fewer US Catholics than in recent memory consider themselves to be strong members of their church. Since 1974, participants in the nationwide General Social Survey who say that they identify with a religious tradition have been asked whether they consider themselves a “strong” or “not very strong” member of that religious community.¹⁴ Only 27 percent of the Catholics polled in 2012 described their religious affiliation as strong, in comparison to 46 percent in 1974. Pew researchers noted that that these Catholic data were “down more than 15 points since the mid-1980s and among the lowest levels seen in the 38 years since strength of religious identity was first measured.”¹⁵ They also observed a contrast between Catholics

¹⁴ The General Social Survey is carried out annually or biennially by researchers at the University of Chicago; see <http://www3.norc.org/gss+website/>.

¹⁵ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “‘Strong’ Catholic Identity at a Four-Decade Low in U.S.: Widening Gap with Protestants” (March 13, 2013), 1, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/03/13/strong-catholic-identity-at-a-four-decade-low-in-us/>

J. Patrick Hornbeck II is Associate Professor and Chair of the Theology Department at Fordham University. He authored What Is a Lollard? (Oxford, 2010) and is author or editor of other books and articles on medieval and contemporary Catholicism. With Tom Beaudoin (Fordham), he holds a Louisville Institute grant for the study of deconversion.

and Protestants: more than half (54 percent) of the Protestants surveyed characterized their religious identity as strong. By these measures, while the strength of self-reported Catholic religious affiliation has declined by more than 40 percent in the past four decades, the strength of self-reported Protestant affiliation has increased by more than 25 percent and stands at an all-time high.¹⁶

The Pew Forum's data on the self-reported strength of US Catholics' religious affiliation are consonant with a series of trends in Catholic identity and practice that have become increasingly evident in the past decade. For instance, self-reported church attendance among Catholics is significantly down: when asked if they attend Mass once a week or more often, 47 percent of Catholics said yes in 1974, but only 24 percent in 2012; even among "strong" Catholics, church attendance fell from 85 percent in 1974 to 53 percent in 2012.¹⁷ At the same time, many who were baptized as Catholics no longer affiliate with the church. A survey conducted in 2007 found that while all American religious communities experience the continual influx and outflow of members, Catholicism "has experienced the greatest net losses" of the major US religious traditions.¹⁸ "While nearly one-in-three Americans (31 percent) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four (24 percent) describe themselves as Catholic."¹⁹ This study also estimated that persons who once identified themselves as Catholic but now identify in some other way comprise at least 10 percent of the national adult population; if they were treated as a denomination of their own, they would be the third largest religious group in the United States, behind Catholics and Baptists. Finally, a significant percentage of those who once identified as Catholic but no longer do are among the substantial numbers of US residents who currently say of themselves "that they are atheists,

¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ It should be noted that Americans, as a group, are not particularly hesitant to change congregations, denominations, or even religious traditions altogether. In their acclaimed study *American Grace*, Robert Putnam and David Campbell estimated that nearly half (47 percent) of Americans have changed places of worship at some point in their lives, often changing denominations or religious traditions at the same time. Separately, the 2007 survey under discussion here found that more than 28 percent of Americans "have changed their religious affiliation from that in which they were raised." See Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 168; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation; Diverse and Dynamic (2008)," 5–6, <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>.

¹⁹ Pew Forum, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," 6.

agnostics, or have no particular religion.” These “nones,” as sociologists have begun to call them, now comprise nearly 20 percent of the adult population and 32 percent of those under age thirty.²⁰

In the past decade, Roman Catholic bishops, Catholic pastoral workers, and researchers from inside and outside the Catholic community have begun to pay greater attention to the disaffiliation of large numbers of US Catholics. Some, like the journalist Peter Steinfels, have expressed sadness about what they take to be the near inevitability of continued declines in Catholic demographics: “Month after month, year after year, I...see decisions (but mostly nondecisions) by Catholic leaders steadily reducing even further the chances that the faith will be the central reality and priceless blessing in my grandsons’ lives that it was in mine and my wife’s. I realize that I am grieving.”²¹ Others, like the authors of the book *American Catholics Today*, have preferred to downplay disaffiliation and to emphasize instead the changes taking place in the relationship between Catholics and the church: “Most Catholics have not left. They still consider themselves Catholic, but they are not as attached to the Church as previous generations have been.”²² A minority has taken disaffiliation not to be a cause for worry, since these commentators, like the archbishop of Minneapolis-St. Paul, understand those who disaffiliate to be those who were not especially serious about their faith to begin with: “We want people who live their faith. . . . I believe that it’s important that if you’re going to be Catholic, that you have to be 100% Catholic.”²³ Finally, approaches informed by social science have been taken by the Roman Catholic bishops’ conference of Australia, and by the bishop of Trenton, New Jersey, who have commissioned teams of researchers to investigate why members of their churches had stopped attending Mass or had disaffiliated outright.²⁴

A variety of research methods and a variety of theological and social scientific frameworks have been brought to bear on the phenomenon of Catholic disaffiliation. It is clear that how one assesses theologically the possibility of change in Catholic identity and practice affects both one’s research

²⁰ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Nones” on the Rise, 7, 10.

²¹ Steinfels, “Further Adrift.”

²² William V. D’Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge, and Mary L. Gautier, *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 148.

²³ “Minn. Archbishop: No ‘Lukewarm’ Catholics Welcome,” *USA Today*, October 19, 2010, http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-10-20-catholic19_ST_N.htm.

²⁴ Robert Dixon, Sharon Bond, et al., *Research Project on Catholics Who Have Stopped Attending Mass: Final Report* (2007), <http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/pdf/DCReport.pdf>; Byron and Zech, “Why They Left.”

methods and one's eventual data. In 1979, for instance, the sociologist Dean Hoge interviewed a cohort of former Catholics for a study on "dropouts" from Roman Catholicism that he was commissioned to produce by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (now the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops). Hoge's category "dropout" rhetorically linked former Catholics with young Americans who do not finish their formal education, and Hoge's study viewed their departures from Catholicism as regrettable, as aberrations to be explained to his audience of church leaders.²⁵ More recently, other researchers have framed the phenomenon of disaffiliation in newer terms—as "church leaving" (in several studies of evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic churches in New Zealand, and in broader studies in the United Kingdom); as adopting an "ex"-identity (as in the sociological work of Helen R. F. Ebaugh); and as "deconversion" (in works of literary analysis and in an extensive study of religious disaffiliation in Germany and the United States).²⁶ It is this last term that I will employ in this brief article. After introducing the concept of deconversion, this article describes the methods employed and challenges encountered in a new study of deconversion among Roman Catholics in the United States. While definitive results are yet some time off, the article concludes with three broad observations about US Catholics who have deconverted or are in the process of deconverting. Much work remains to be done to understand and to make theological sense of their experiences.

* * *

First, then, what does it mean to think about deconversion, and how does deconversion differ from religious disaffiliation or disidentification, that is, no longer affiliating or identifying oneself with a religious tradition?²⁷ The term may have been coined by L. Norman Skonovd, who in 1981 completed

²⁵ Dean R. Hoge, *Converts, Dropouts, Returnees: A Study of Religious Change among Catholics* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981).

²⁶ Among many other works, see Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys beyond the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2002); Jamieson, *Church Leavers: Faith Journeys Five Years On* (London: SPCK, 2006); Philip Richter and Leslie J. Francis, *Gone but Not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning* (London: Darton Longman Todd, 1998); Helen R. F. Ebaugh, *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); John D. Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994); and Streib et al., *Deconversion*.

²⁷ Portions of this section of the present article draw on J. Patrick Hornbeck II, "Deconversion from Roman Catholicism: Mapping a Fertile Field," *American Catholic Studies* 122, no. 2 (2011): 1–29.

his doctoral dissertation on the process by which individuals leave totalizing religious movements such as the Unification Church or the Peoples Temple.²⁸ For Skonovd, deconversion is the process that leads an individual to decide to sever ties with a religious tradition, mainline or charismatic. It consists “of an acceptance of life’s ambiguity and of the non-exclusiveness of any so-called truth. There remains a wistfulness for the definiteness of commitment, but you know that can never be.”²⁹ Skonovd’s choice of the term “deconversion,” in contrast to value-laden epithets such as “defectors,” “schismatics,” “heretics,” “apostates,” or “lapsed,” reflected an emerging consensus among scholars of his time that the latter terms fail to capture the complex reality of the process by which a person chooses to leave a religious group, and may actually push individuals on the brink of leaving toward speedier or more complete disaffiliation.³⁰

Since religious disaffiliation was first broached as a subject for research in the late 1960s, most scholarship in this area has focused on the factors that make it more likely for persons to disaffiliate from their religious tradition of origin. Early studies identified variables such as higher socioeconomic status, higher educational attainment, poor relationships with parents, and psychological factors such as “radicalism” and “maladjustment.”³¹ The first published studies of those who leave Catholicism likewise identified a set of factors that seem to be shared widely among former Catholics: age, tensions in family life, objections to Catholic moral teaching, weariness with Catholic practice, and opposition to the changes introduced by the Second Vatican Council.³²

Scholarship on deconversion is interested in the circumstances that lead individuals to let go of previously embraced religious traditions, beliefs, and

²⁸ L. Norman Skonovd, “Apostasy: The Process of Defection from Religious Totalism” (PhD diss., University of California, Davis, 1981).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

³⁰ Many studies of the 1960s through the 1990s have used terms such as those listed here. See, among many others, J. Zelan, “Religious Apostasy, Higher Education, and Occupational Choice,” *Sociology of Education* 41 (1968): 370–79; D. G. Bromley, *Falling from the Faith: Causes and Consequences of Religious Apostasy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1988); Bromley, ed., *The Politics of Religious Apostasy: The Role of Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998). On these epithets as a catalyst for disaffiliation, see Merlin B. Brinkerhoff and Kathryn L. Burke, “Disaffiliation: Some Notes on ‘Falling from the Faith,’” *Sociological Analysis* 41 (1980): 41–54.

³¹ See, for instance, Zelan, “Religious Apostasy”; David Caplovitz and Fred Sherrow, *The Religious Dropouts: Apostasy among College Graduates* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1977); and C. W. Mueller and W. T. Johnson, “Socioeconomic Status and Religious Participation,” *American Sociological Review* 40 (1975): 785–800.

³² See Hoge. *Converts, Dropouts, Returnees*.

practices, but it also seeks to investigate critically the *process* by which a person moves from normative to less normative forms of affiliation and identification with a religious tradition, or by which a person ceases to affiliate or identify at all. It is possible to define deconversion, at least with regard to Roman Catholicism, as changing one's practices and/or beliefs in relationship to Catholicism as a person believes it to be articulated by the Catholic tradition's religious authorities. That is, deconversion happens when a person detours from the beliefs and practices that have been approved by authorities who represent themselves as the privileged brokers of such beliefs and practices. This "detour" (*détournement*) is not so much a temporary diversion that eventually leads a person back to her original course, but rather a new path that a person embarks on in order to reach an envisioned destination, such as spiritual integration, flourishing, or wholeness.³³ It is not the detour of an orange road sign, promising a return to the previously intended path after a few extra turns and some waiting in traffic; rather, it is usually a detour more akin to an unexpected life event, such as the beginning or end of an intimate relationship, a relocation or new position at work, or the untimely death of a close family member or friend—a detour, in short, that is likely to leave one significantly, though not always irreversibly, changed in relation to one's aspirations and goals.

Thus deconversion research fundamentally takes seriously the narrative of the individual who is reporting an internal shift or shifts. It seeks to explore that individual's experience, as well as any subsequent changes in belief, practice, or affiliation, as specifically theological material. And it creates space for the interpretation of such theological material in potentially positive, rather than inevitably negative, terms. Deconversion, in this framework, is not necessarily about the failure of an individual to hold fast to the beliefs and practices that her religious tradition requires of her, nor about the failure of the tradition to inculcate in her the necessary reverence for those beliefs and practices. Rather, it is about the ways in which individuals elect to live in relation to changing sets of theological authorities, about the centers of gravity that individuals encounter in their theological lives, and about the consequences of their experiences and choices for their beliefs, their practices, their understanding of their beliefs and practices, and their relationships with others.

³³ This notion of "detour" leans on that of Michael de Certeau, who took from the radical Situationist movement the concept of *détournement*, i.e., using established modes of discourse in ways that were not envisioned by the original speakers. See especially de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

The new study “Varieties of Deconversion in Roman Catholicism,” which Tom Beaudoin and I are directing, seeks to add to the growing body of research on deconversion in Christianity; it is the first study to examine the experience of current and former Roman Catholics specifically through the interpretive lens of deconversion.³⁴ The study involves more than six hundred individuals who responded in August 2012 to an Internet-based questionnaire; of these, thirteen participants, all residing in the New York metropolitan area, were selected to participate in hour-long, semistructured interviews that covered their experience of Catholicism over the course of their lives, the changes they have undergone in relationship to Catholicism, their views of church leaders, and their opinions on what if anything Catholic leaders should do in response to those who are deconverting. The study also involves an approximately equal number of Roman Catholic pastoral workers, lay and ordained, who participated in similar interviews about their experience of working with Catholics who are or may be undergoing deconversion.

At least three features of the Catholic tradition make research on deconversion in Catholicism different from similar research on Protestant denominations. First, whereas a number of Protestant denominations maintain formal standards and procedures for determining whether a person, regardless of the terms in which he chooses to identify himself, is in fact an active member of a church, Catholic teachings on church membership complicate the already complex process of distinguishing between active, inactive, and former Catholics. In canon law, a person’s membership in the church depends almost exclusively on the fact of her baptism as a Catholic. Even if a person is excommunicated, except during a unique period between 1983 and 2009 when it was possible to choose to make a “formal act of defection from the church,” she remains a Catholic permanently.³⁵ “The Christian faithful are those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through baptism, have been constituted as the people of God. Those baptized are fully in the communion of the Catholic Church on this earth who are joined with

³⁴ The “Varieties of Deconversion in Roman Catholicism” study was approved by Fordham University’s Institutional Research Board on May 17, 2012; the study protocol was amended on October 19, 2012. See http://www.fordham.edu/academics/office_of_research/institutional_review/.

³⁵ Between 1983 and 2009, there existed in canon law the possibility that an individual might make an *actus formalis defectionis ab Ecclesia* (a formal act of defection from the church). This possibility appears to have been eliminated by the *motu proprio* of Pope Benedict XVI *Omnium in Mentem*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20091026_codex-iuris-canonici_lt.html. Further research remains to be done on this extraordinary canonical situation.

Christ in its visible structure by the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical governance.”³⁶ Because of this understanding of church membership, it is likely that at least some persons who have ceased to identify themselves as Catholic continue to be counted as Catholics by the institutional Church. The absence of detailed annual membership rosters means there is no easy way for researchers to identify former Catholics by comparing one year’s list with the next, and the practices for keeping demographic records that are employed by Catholic dioceses and archdioceses, at least in the United States, vary so substantially from one diocese to the next that the church’s numbers are not unequivocally reliable.³⁷ Moreover, there is no universally agreed-on standard for determining whether a person is to be counted an active, inactive, or former member of the church; it is not even certain whether these categories are the most appropriate ones to use.³⁸

Second, without underestimating the many ways in which non-Catholic Christian denominations have been implicated in the formation and maintenance of broader cultural norms (e.g., through the role of the Church of England in the United Kingdom), scholars have commented at length on the extent to which Catholicism has shaped the experience of a number of US subcultures. For many individuals, it would be difficult to consider one’s identity as an Irish American, Polish American, Italian American, or Latino/a American without considering one’s Catholicism, whether active or ancestral, as well; African American and Asian American Catholics are formed as well by distinctive sets of cultural practices, values, and experiences. It is reasonable to assume that where religious and cultural identities are as complexly intertwined as in these subgroups, the deconversion process will be equally shaped by cultural expectations. Just as powerfully, recent work on the “whiteness” of the leaders, teachings, and theologies most common in US Catholicism reveals the need for white researchers in the field of deconversion to attend especially carefully to the experiences of

³⁶ Code of Canon Law, cc. 204 §1–205.

³⁷ On the actual record-keeping practices of a sample of dioceses and archdioceses, see J. Patrick Hornbeck II, “Counting Catholics in the United States of America,” *American Catholic Studies* 123, no. 4 (2012): 1–21.

³⁸ In his 1979 study of Catholic “dropouts,” Hoge attempted to overcome one of these challenges by proposing a formal definition of an inactive Catholic: “a person who has not attended Mass at least twice in the past year, apart from weddings, funerals, Christmas, and Easter. Elderly persons physically unable to get to Mass technically fit the category but are not included in our study. A person who has switched to a non-Catholic church and attends its services (but not Catholic Mass) is considered inactive” (*Converts, Dropouts, Returnees*, 5).

deconverting nonwhite persons, and to take care not to interpret such persons' narratives in terms drawn exclusively from the experience of whites.³⁹

Finally, there is the potential hostility of many church leaders and church members toward those who have left. We have already mentioned the effect of terms such as "heretic" and "lapsed," as well as the assumption, usually implicit but sometimes explicit, that persons who deconvert from Catholicism do so because they have failed to accept or to live up to the Catholic tradition's expectations of and for them. Though by many accounts the use of condemnatory epithets for former church members has declined since the Second Vatican Council, negative attitudes toward former church members persist among some active Catholics, especially some of the parents, other family members, fellow parishioners, and spiritual leaders of former members. Again without underestimating the existence of parallel phenomena in other religious communities, the particular kinds of hurt that many have experienced as a result of deconverting from Catholicism may distinguish their experience from that of deconversion from some other Christian denominations.

* * *

All three of these factors—the hurt and stigma felt both by many former Catholics and by many of those whose beliefs and practices do not line up with what they take to be normative Catholic ones, the difficulties involved in identifying and counting persons who have deconverted or are deconverting, and Catholicism's complexly intertwined relationships with a number of racial and cultural groups—make the study of deconversion in Roman Catholicism distinctive. There is not space here to describe any of the possible methodological and theological approaches that might help to make the impact of these factors more transparent. However, there is space to share a few matters for reflection from the "Varieties of Deconversion" study.

It is clear that we are only beginning to comprehend the extent of deconversion among US Catholics, as well as the extent to which many individuals who continue to affiliate with Catholicism do not believe and practice in the ways that the official church expects them to believe and practice. Study participants have reported a wide variety of deconversion experiences, ranging from losing faith in God to choosing to stop attending Mass, deciding to

³⁹ On this point, see especially Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), as well as Jon Nilson, *Hearing Past the Pain: Why White Catholic Theologians Need Black Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), and Laurie Cassidy and Alexander Mikulich, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

practice birth control, or electing not to follow the church's teachings in other areas of personal (especially sexual) morality. Perhaps because study participants were recruited from online announcements on Catholic-oriented websites (e.g., those of the *National Catholic Reporter* and *America* and *Commonweal* magazines), a majority of them continue to identify themselves as Catholics, but others have ceased to do so. Both participants who have experienced deconversion and participants who serve as Catholic pastoral workers have reported that they do not believe experiences of deconversion to be exceptional: many of their friends and associates have also chosen either to believe and practice Catholicism in ways not envisioned by the institutional church, or to disaffiliate from Catholicism altogether. While some existing studies provide helpful data for estimating the size of the Catholic or formerly Catholic population that has undergone the kind of detour that can be called deconversion, there are no reliable statistics. It is, however, evident that the standard estimates for the size of the Catholic population of the United States, and of particular dioceses, do not necessarily bear resemblance to reality on the ground.⁴⁰

Second, if a sizable number or even a majority of experiences of deconversion do not entail self-reported disaffiliation or disidentification from Catholicism, then it is a fallacy to think about affiliation and disaffiliation, participation and deconversion, as strict binaries. Participants in the "Varieties of Deconversion" study suggest that persons rarely if ever sever their ties to Catholicism fully. One participant, a married white male whose struggles with Catholicism culminated in his decision to stop attending Mass after his parish priest seemed to dismiss the sexual abuse of children as "complicated," shared this:

One of the things I really missed at Christmas was, not going to church, but the, the church that I, I went to ... they had non-conventional Christmas gifts, and they were cards from various charities. ... And I would make a donation and get multiple cards and give them to all the women—my sister, my wife, my daughter, nieces, blah blah blah—in my life at Christmas. And, this year, because I don't go to church, that didn't occur. And I, I felt sad about that. It's funny because it is a charity that I routinely give to anyway, but the fact that I didn't have that card to, to give to the women in my life made me a little bit sad. In fact, so much that, I thought of going in before Mass [laughs] and making a donation, giving the cards and then leaving. ... But I've also thought about going between 7:30 and 8 and leaving before Mass begins too, although I have not done that. I've toyed with the idea.⁴¹

⁴⁰ See further Hornbeck, "Counting Catholics."

⁴¹ "Varieties of Deconversion in Roman Catholicism," Deconvert Interview 8.

Another participant, a white male who had been told by two priests that his civil divorce made him ineligible to participate in confession, has devised his own practice of reflection and penance: "There's no other options. So, [with regard] to confession I decided that, that when I trans—, I felt when I transgressed, I would make a act of contrition in and of myself and I'd attend an extra Mass as a penance or, the format was something like that. And that's how I have been."⁴² A third participant, a Latino male who changed his Catholic practice in college and later married a Jewish woman, describes his relationship with Catholicism as strongly connected to particular localities: "In a strange way, I become more Catholic when I return back to Texas. And when I'm here, I'm Catholic but it's not the same because it was so embedded in the culture of rural Texas and rural Mexico, and it is not here in New York."⁴³ Finally, there is the example of a white female who is about to marry in the church despite having stopped attending Mass and having recognized that, with regard to her Catholic beliefs and practices, "I really just realized I had left it all behind, it was all gone." About her wedding, she sounded notes of both hesitation and hope:

My fiancé asked me, he says he feels kind of, because he has no relationship to the church either, though he was raised Catholic and went to Catholic schools his whole life. Umm, he says, it feels like we're kind of like, duping them in a way, and like, just not being honest, and, which I guess is true. We are going to go through this pre-Cana and everything and not like really endorse what you should be endorsing as Catholics being married in the church. But, because I consider it so, like a cultural thing, and being so wrapped with how I was raised and my family, it just feels like I should be married in the church. So, but, my relationship now is non-existent—don't go to church, don't, I don't even know if there's a God, I don't know. I want there to be really badly ... I guess I'm kind of holding out hope. You know, I would like it to resurface, I'd like to stumble upon some kind of answer. So, and that's another reason for, you know, at least nominally being part of the church, so that just in case, I can go back. And I do think that for, it's important for children to be raised in some kind of religion because it helps provide a moral structure and you know, at least start them off on something.⁴⁴

All four of these individuals live in relationships of ambiguity and tension with Catholicism. For the first two, voluntarily or involuntarily ceasing some normative Catholic practices has led them to contemplate or implement substitutes, alternative practices that nevertheless may be connected to their earlier

⁴² *Ibid.*, Deconvert Interview 10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Deconvert Interview 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Deconvert Interview 3.

Catholic life. The second two occasionally take part in Catholic practices—namely, attending Mass and having a church wedding—but do so for reasons that, according to both, are “cultural” more than normatively theological. All these participants are among the many individuals in the United States who have chosen to practice Catholicism in particularized, nonnormative ways.

A final lesson is that many individuals who have undergone deconversion, as well as many pastoral workers, are aware of initiatives on the part of the institutional church aimed at helping them return to normative forms of belief and practice. A significant number of participants mentioned the phrase “the new evangelization,” words that characterized much of the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI and that appear in the title of the emeritus pope’s final worldwide synod of bishops, “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.”⁴⁵ However, despite their familiarity with at least some ecclesial initiatives aimed at persons like themselves, most study participants believe that the church should prioritize *not* the winning back of former members, but rather the putting in order of its own house. They believe that much work remains to be done to respond to the sexual abuse of minors by clergy, to welcome women and sexual and gender minorities into full participation in the Church, to overcome what they regard as clerical and episcopal hypocrisy, and to resolve the internal struggles that they usually characterize in binary terms as battles between traditionalists and progressives. One participant, a married white female, responded in these words when asked what the Church should do in response to disaffiliation and deconversion:

Well ... pick their battles. I mean, I, I think, focus on, focus on, focus on the liturgy, focus, not focus so much on people’s personal lives, you know. I mean, I know we have, we have rules about that, but if, if you want people’s lives to change or be better, you know, like throwing them out not’s going to do that, you know. Like, like, I mean, I think we need to be Christian, try and live the gospel, you know, like be Christian witnesses, right. ... But come on man, you’re, you’re feeling free to have lawsuits about birth control ... like this matters, you know. And, and so, I think that’s, that’s a lot of it. And, and I think the New Evangelization’s a problem. I mean, now that I hear these guys talking, I wish they’d stop, you know. It was much better when I never heard from them.⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineamenta-xiii-assembly_en.html.

⁴⁶ “Varieties of Deconversion in Roman Catholicism,” Deconvert Interview 9.

These early observations from the “Varieties of Deconversion” study suggest that there is no single set of circumstances that prompts individuals to revise significantly their relationship with Catholicism, nor is there any single outcome that all deconverts share. Some permanently cease their practice of Catholicism. Others continue to practice, but do so on their own terms. Still others do not change their external practices at all, even though they substantially redefine the meaning of those practices for themselves and their loved ones. While “Varieties of Deconversion” is a limited, qualitative, and therefore nongeneralizable study, the affinities between the interview data and the broader, quantitative statistics with which this article began suggest that deconversion is taking place within US Catholicism at a rapid pace. Further research will be necessary to establish whether and how the contemporary experience of deconversion resembles deconversion in earlier decades; to what extent deconversion occurs differently among individuals of different races, genders, generations, and sexual identities; and to what extent existing models for the study of deconversion, which were developed in dialogue with predominantly Protestant populations, are applicable to the Catholic experience as well. For the present, it is certain that to describe or theologize about contemporary US Catholicism without making reference to those who have deconverted, are in the process of deconverting, or may deconvert in the future is to ignore one of the fastest-growing groups of American Catholics.

J. PATRICK HORNBECK II
Fordham University