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‘Who Joins the Catholic Church and Why?’

Exploring the nature of Catholic conversion for individuals in the Archdiocese of Southwark.

Thesis submitted by:

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For the Award of Doctor of Philosophy

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St Mary's University, London

Susan Frances Longhurst

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Abstract

This thesis represents the first detailed sociological study of contemporary Britons undergoing Catholic conversion in the UK. The increasing influence of secularisation and widespread religious decline has been reflected in the paucity of conversion research and sporadic academic interest over the last forty years. The direction of this study has been shaped by the literature exploring the potential to categorise and pattern subjective religious change through motif experiences or typologies. Inspired by recent research exploring adult initiation to Catholicism in the US and identifying significant parallels in the UK, this research sought to answer two key questions ‘Who joins the Catholic Church and Why?’ The main aims of this research were to map the profile of individuals choosing to convert to Catholicism in 2018/19 and to explore the motivations, factors and experiences which had influenced their decisions to become Catholic. Using the Archdiocese of Southwark as a case study, a mixed methods approach was adopted, comprising a quantitative survey and semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in a phased approach. The construction of a demographic profile of contemporary British seekers in the Archdiocese of Southwark had important implications for tailoring adult initiation catechesis for a spectrum of religiosity. This study found that religious change could be explored using a process orientated approach and subjectively characterised using four dominant motif experiences. Significantly, this research proposed a new branch motif called ‘Affective Synthesis’ which augments the literature and is contextually tailored to secular culture. This research culminates in a range of recommendations for the Church’s mission, recognising the opportunities to evangelise in the earliest stages of spiritual awakening, in conjunction with an ecclesial mindset of radical welcome and the role of post-initiation support in laying the foundations for a strong, Catholic identity.

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## 1 CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

This thesis represents the first detailed sociological study of individuals undergoing Catholic conversion in the UK, reporting the findings from a case study of research with individuals in the process of becoming Catholic in thirteen parishes across the Archdiocese of Southwark. The primary objective of this research was to explore religious conversion to Catholicism in the UK from a contemporary context, to answer the question ‘Who joins the Catholic Church and Why?’ The main aims of this research were to map the profile of individuals choosing to convert to Catholicism in 2018/19 in a sample of parishes in Southwark and to explore the motivations, factors and experiences which had influenced their decision to become Catholic.

At a time when religion is experiencing rapid decline, with over half of British adults leaving religion behind altogether, the decision to focus on Catholic converts may at first seem counter intuitive (Bruce and Voas 2019:3). Sparked by recent research conducted into adult initiation in the US, I was excited to discover significant parallels in the number of UK adults seeking reception into the Catholic Church annually (Yamane 2014). I felt compelled to find out the sequence of events which had led this trend-bucking group of individuals to explore faith, specifically Catholicism, at a time when religion is regarded with suspicion or worse, indifference, by society at large. I wanted to understand their experience of becoming Catholic in all its gritty richness, to learn what had attracted them to the Catholic faith in the first instance and to present a tangible, realistic picture of what it means to be a contemporary Catholic in British culture. Understanding the broader context around Catholic conversion allowed me to formulate secondary research questions looking specifically at the mechanisms involved in establishing a Catholic identity and seeking to identify the elements of Catholicism which continue to attract people in an increasingly secular culture.



In reviewing the sociological literature on religious conversion, I was particularly interested in the work of Lofland and Skonovd (1981:373-85). The authors suggested that individual conversion could vary qualitatively between people and proposed six major 'motifs' to categorise the experience of religious change. I was struck by the idea that religious conversion could be quantified or at least categorised in this way; I wanted to see if these typologies were still applicable in a contemporary Catholic context, and if so, whether they had changed in emphasis or occurrence in relation to the increasingly secular nature of British culture.

Lofland and Skonovd's conversion 'motifs' have remained a pivotal reference point in conversion literature going forward and most notably, were included by Rambo in his extensive, multi-disciplinary exploration of the process of religious change (1993: 14-17). Rambo proposed a seven-stage model which broke down the experience of religious transformation into its constituent parts, exploring the journey of religious change from beginning to end, including several early stages relating to religious awakening, a key area of focus for this research. I decided to use Rambo's staged model as a framework for analysing the experiences of people becoming Catholic, and to explore in light of Lofland and Skonovd's conversion motifs.

The findings of this research have enabled me to present a demographic profile of British adults wanting to become Catholic from September 2018 to April 2019 and have provided some central themes which go some way to explaining what factors are at work for people in the earliest stages of spiritual awakening. Working with Rambo's seven stage model of religious conversion, I have explored the conversion narratives of the research participants from a process-orientated approach; by focusing on each of the seven stages, I discuss the major factors at work in people's lives which were influential in their religious journey to Catholicism. I have evaluated the subjective experiences of

individuals who took part in this research and correlated these findings in line with the six major conversion motifs proposed by Lofland and Sknonovd. Using the motifs in this way has allowed me to present a critique of the weight, occurrence and emphasis of the motifs as they arise in contemporary culture. The culmination of this research lies in discovery of a new set of characteristics in which I assert a new branch motif, Affective Synthesis. This new branch, linked to the Affective motif augments the six motifs proposed by Lofland and Skonovd and in doing so, provides a new interpretation of individual religious change which is highly contextual and linked to advanced secularity.

The following introductory chapter provides a summary of the research project, exploring some of the key themes in the literature around religious conversion and recent research which has emerged over recent years. The discussion then moves to consider the research methods used, concluding with a breakdown of the findings within each chapter.

### **1.1 Current issues in religious conversion literature.**

This research is firmly rooted in the sociological exploration of religious conversion and, as such, brackets a theological interpretation of the divine-human relationship. The focus for this study lies in the exploration of religious transformation and in doing so, attempts to bridge a significant gap in the literature around religious change from a contemporary perspective. It is perhaps unsurprising to discover that conversion research tends to coincide with periods of religious vitality and resurgence, positioned to offer sociological explanations behind large scale religious currents and global change in the realm of the economic, political and socio-cultural (Bruce 2018:166). The emergence of New Religious Movements in the 1960's, sparked a wave of sociological studies looking at the factors which might lead individuals in large numbers to embrace

religious change (Lofland and Stark 1965:862-875, Barker 1984:1-11). Emergent research identified a range of predispositional and situational factors which they projected could 'push' a person toward a new religious option and their work displayed a distinctly causal focus. These included the existence of tension in an individual's life, the cultivation of positive relationships and inter-personal bonds with religious members, who showed them answers to their problems within a specifically religious framework and encouraged interaction with the new religious group (Lofland and Stark 1965:864-875).

A pivotal tranche of research developed around the conferment of benefits that religion could provide in people's lives asserting that religious change could be viewed through a decision-making lens, a choice to be weighed up based on how the individual might be affected socially, economically and psychologically (Gartrell and Shannon 1985:33). Personal attachment and inter-connected bonds became increasingly important mechanisms driving religious change in others; not only did they afford people extended social networks and ready-made communities of support but they allowed individuals to see how religion could work in their lives (Richardson and Stewart, 1978:33-34). Having established various sociological models confirming that certain personal situations and circumstances could have a substantial impact in predisposing someone towards accepting a new religious option, later research moved to consider the role of the individual in driving their own religious pathway. Currents in the literature began to recognise the active agency of individuals in guiding religious change, a substantial move away from the passive model of conversion as experienced by the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. Additionally, it was found that within the active vs passive paradigm, choosing one's own religious pathway was more highly valued

than an inherited religious identity (Richardson 1985:163-179, Straus 1979:160, Bromley and Shupe 1979:170, Travisano 1970:594-606).

In the early eighties, research by Lofland and Skonovd moved beyond earlier models which spoke purely about causation in relation to religious change and reflected a wider shift in the literature towards a more nuanced sociological approach. The authors proposed that the experience of religious conversion could vary qualitatively between people, displaying key characteristics which presented as distinctive typologies or motif experiences; Mystical, Intellectual, Affectional, Experimental, Revivalist and Coercive (Lofland and Skonovd 1981:375). Lofland and Skonovd asserted that the conversion motifs had the potential to account for shifts in conversion experiences in different historical epochs, societies and even between different sub-groups within the same society. They concluded their research with two challenges; first, recognising the highly contextual nature of the motifs, the authors encouraged future research which would take account of shifting socio-cultural trends and the impact on the motifs and secondly, suggested that the motifs could be augmented by a process-orientated approach to religious change. In 1993, Rambo proposed a seven-stage model which could interpret religious change from the earliest stages of spiritual awakening to the point of commitment and consequences (Rambo 1989:48). His work very much represented a desire to recognise the importance of studying individual religious change and to address what he termed 'disciplinary myopia' which had developed in the field of religious conversion over time (Rambo 1989:47).

## **1.2 Impetus for research**

In 2014, sociologist David Yamane published his research exploring Catholic conversion in the US and the importance of adult initiation rites within secular culture. Yamane identified that despite the impact of secularising trends on religious affiliation

and practice in the US, a significant percentage of the adult population were still coming forward to become Catholic each year. US figures reported that over the last ten years, an average number of 67,298 adults annually were being baptised Catholic and a further 83,050 baptised adults were received into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. With Catholic converts making up 11% of contemporary US Catholics and 2.6% of the entire adult US population, Yamane felt that this group warranted serious attention (2014:7).

Inspired by Yamane's research, I discovered a similar finding within the British data, a small but consistent number of people choosing to become Catholic in the UK each year: in 2011, 5,180 individuals were received into the Catholic church and in 2012, 4,222 with Westminster and Southwark claiming amongst the highest numbers for each diocese (512 and 382 respectively) (Diocese of Westminster 2017; Archdiocese of Southwark and Glenfield, P 2018). In 2017, over 2000 adults in England and Wales participated in a diocesan Rite of Election, prior to receiving one or more of the Sacraments of Initiation on their journey to reception into the Catholic Church. Of these, just under 1000 had not previously been baptised. An important counter trend in Catholic conversion was identified, revealing a group of individuals wanting to become Catholic, about whom little was known.

Yamane found that by studying the process of adult initiation, he was able to gain insight not only into the experience of the individual, but also into the vision and transmission of parochial Catholicism; research into adult initiation had the potential to define the contemporary nature of both the Christian and the Church. (Kavanagh 1991:145; see also Yamane 2014:7). I was particularly inspired by the scope and potential of studying the experiences of British converts for a number of reasons; not only because it afforded me a valuable opportunity to identify those people who wanted

to become Catholic and to explore their experiences, but to look even further into the attraction of Catholicism and the reality of establishing a new religious identity within a contemporary context. By asking people to describe their journey from the earliest stages of spiritual awakening, through the process of Catholic adult initiation, I would inevitably capture the conversion experience through several different lenses, that of the individual, clergy and parish communities. Early invitations to write about the focus of this research served to support and reinforce the Church's interest in exploring adult initiation in greater depth through the experiences of this counter-cultural group (see Appendix E). The orientation of the research had an inherently practical focus, to explore and illuminate the conversion experience for British adults in Southwark Archdiocese and within this fuller understanding, provide tailored outreach which could feed directly into the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church.

Within the context of my personal experiences as a cradle Catholic, having experienced the gradual waning of religious practice and adherence within my own family and the declining number of parishioners at Mass each week, this locus of this research represented a beacon of hope. It is hopeful to explore the ways in which God can penetrate the lives of human beings, causing meaningful and lasting change, and to position within the dominant secular narrative. As Bernard Lonergan asserts, it is in the accounts of people who stand as exceptions to the societal 'norms' which provide the answers to the persistence and resilience of the Catholic tradition and therein lies the hope (1997:592-94; see also Kim 2010:986).

### **1.3 Lofland & Skonovd's conversion motifs and Rambo's process orientated approach**

Since Lofland and Skonovd's work continues to hold a strong position in contemporary conversion research some thirty years on (Bruce 2018:161), I decided to use the

conversion motifs within the framework of Rambo's model as I felt they had the capacity to present a complete picture of the subjective conversion experience, positioned within a staged approach. It was reassuring to find that Rambo's staged model had been applied in recent doctoral research exploring the experiences of conversion and deconversion within the contemporary British Muslim community (Alyedreessy 2016) and signposted towards an emerging tranche of new research exploring religiosity in contemporary culture. Doctoral research published in 2019 explored the path of religious conversion for highly educated atheists to Christianity across six contemporary Western European countries (Harmon 2019). This research was particularly interesting in its focus on the investigation of the conversion experience using a substantive approach, which the author suggested was crucial to provide a comprehensive and comparative picture of this specific conversion pathway. Further doctoral research has been conducted into the pedagogy of Christian adult formation (Rooms 2007), an evaluation of the Alpha course in regard to its claim as an educational course in helping people to find the 'meaning of life' (Heard 2008) and pertinently, an exploration of the RCIA and liminal experience (Ross 2011). As well as touching on the area of Catholic adult initiation, this last piece of research closely followed the research methods used in my study, adopting a phased approach of semi-structured interviews to capture a longitudinal perspective with a smaller cohort of research participants.

The visibility of new studies such as these served to validate the relevance and importance of exploring religious conversion within a contemporary context and was very much undergirded by the emergence of new research looking at patterns and trends of religious revival and growth. Goodhew's research exploring church expansion in London over the last forty years, reflects a city populated by people who are

surprisingly interested in faith (Goodhew & Cooper 2019:3). Whilst the data shows decline in some London congregations and denominations, when taken together, the overall trends show that the church in London has grown significantly since 1980. Goodhew argues that the existence of such data warrants a serious reassessment of the Christian narrative as portrayed in academia and the media (2019:3).

#### **1.4 Research Aims and Objectives**

Fuelled by a growing recognition in the literature of resacralisation, re-enchantment and religious persistence in modern society, I decided to adopt a similar research model to that used by Yamane. I decided to conduct a case study of the Archdiocese of Southwark, a research strategy with an effective methodology to investigate, explore and understand complex issues in real-world contexts (Stake 1995:1-9; Creswell 2014:204). A case study approach had many benefits for the research in that it supported data collection in a variety of real-world settings, allowing me the freedom to enter into parishes, coffee shops and church halls to meet people and to collect data from surveys, interviews, consultations, fieldnotes and local information to present a comprehensive and complete picture (Yin 2014:199). The decision to focus on Southwark Archdiocese was largely based on its rich diversity and distinctive characteristics and as the diocese in which I lived, worshipped and worked, was familiar to me and as such was advantageous for recruitment in terms of the general willingness of parishes to participate in the research.

In September 2018, having sent invitations to all parishes across the Archdiocese, twenty-four parishes indicated that they would like to participate in the research. Of these, thirteen parishes were selected based on size, ethnography, catechetical approach, geographical location and the number of adult initiations recorded annually in the Southwark directory (Archdiocese of Southwark and Glenfield 2018). Parishes



identified all people aged 18 years and above who were currently engaged in adult formation catechesis of some kind, with a view to becoming Catholic. I selected the research participants purposively to achieve a maximum variation sample reflecting a breadth and diverse range of characteristics such as age, marital status, religious background and ethnicity for the quantitative sample (Palinkas et al 2015:533-544).

I adopted a mixed method approach for the research which comprised a quantitative survey to establish a demographic profile of participants and semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in a phased approach. In the field of religious research, surveys have been found to be extremely useful to inform and measure trends and patterns over time, such as exploring the spread of Protestantism in Latin America (Bastian 1993:33-61) and in measuring religious identities (Alwin et al 2006:530-564). The use of semi-structured qualitative interviews has long been recognised as a way of collecting nuanced information about complex issues such as religious experience (McGuire 2008:5; Constantine et al 2006: 227-241); notably, the use of semi-structured interviews was adopted by Alyedreessy and Ross in their doctoral research and served as key contemporary reference points, highlighting effective research methods for exploring religious change. First phase interviews were conducted from September 2018 and a second wave of interviews were repeated with a smaller group of respondents after one year. Although my research comprised a much smaller number of research participants than those in Yamane's study, there were strong similarities in the research model used. In particular, I sought to emulate the longitudinal approach adopted by Yamane because few conversion studies present follow-up data, in many cases due to the financial and practical considerations of conducting qualitative research in this way (Thompson & McLeod 2015:244).

At the beginning of 2020, fifty-three demographic surveys were completed by respondents from 12 parishes in Southwark. Of these, twenty-two people agreed to participate in semi-structured, qualitative interviews and four respondents participated in follow-up interviews a year to eighteen months after being received into the church. Interviews were also conducted with five members of the clergy and five RCIA catechists and the data were augmented by observations and fieldnotes collected during parish visits throughout the data collection phase.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the scope and breadth of the qualitative data collected was extensive since the longitudinal element of the research allowed for a comprehensive account of the conversion experience from beginning to end. Although the major focus of the research lay in the earliest stages of spiritual awakening, it was often possible through both first and second wave interviews, to gain a complex understanding beyond this point. Rambo's seven stage model provided ample space to account for this longitudinal experience and the findings yielded important themes which were unforeseen at the beginning of the study; these included the range and diversity of adult initiation catechesis operating in parishes in Southwark Archdiocese, the practical experience of both attending and delivering RCIA groups, perceptions and insights from parishes belonging to the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, and the post-mystagogical reality of adapting to life within established Catholic culture.

### **1.5 Organisation of chapters.**

It has been the aim of this first introductory chapter to explain the background, aims and objectives of this research. Chapter Two offers a series of reflections and several necessary contextual debates relevant to the foreground of this thesis, presenting a socio-cultural background of contemporary British Catholicism.

Chapter Three presents a review of the literature relating to religious conversion. This discussion explores the historical development of Christian conversion, including the restoration of the RCIA and presents a comparison with the Jewish and Islamic traditions. Major sociological themes relating to attachment theory, social networks will be explored and particularly looking at key models involved in the recruitment of people to New Religious Movements. Finally, this discussion considers identity formation, belief and the search for meaning and the psychological frameworks relating to staged faith development theories.

Chapter Four explains the methods used to conduct this research and will evaluate the unique experiences and challenges involved in conducting research in a religious context. The discussion considers the theoretical framework, issues around insider/outsider bias, the conceptual framework and presents the rationale behind the research design, arriving finally at the thematic schema.

Chapter Five presents the quantitative findings of this research and seeks to provide a demographic profile of the 53 people who agreed to participate in this research project.

Chapters Six to Eight present the qualitative data collected from twenty-two first phase semi-structured interviews with people seeking to become Catholic, five clergy, five catechists and four follow up interviews. The conversion process as experienced by those who participated in the research is presented in stages, using Rambo's seven stage model as a framework.

Chapter Six focuses on one of the central aims of this research, to explore the dominant motivational factors which influenced people in their decisions to find out more about becoming Catholic. This chapter focuses on Rambo's first three stages: Context, Crisis and Quest and highlights key issues such as the impact of childhood experience of

religious practice, the significance of relationships and inter-personal bonds, life events which serve as spiritual catalysts and response style of people in light of contemporary culture.

Chapter Seven moves to consider the journey to Catholicism from the point of formal encounter, when the religious seeker presents themselves to the parish priest or team and brings their nascent faith journey into the light. Necessarily, this chapter considers many of the procedural and practicalities of adult initiation catechesis and looks at several different approaches and strategies used by the participating parishes. Stages four to six of Rambo's model, Encounter, Interaction and Commitment, are covered in the discussion which explores issues such as initial modes of contact, strategic style of clergy and advocates, the benefits of conversion and the central elements involved in building a Catholic identity. Finally, the significance of rites, rituals and rhetoric are considered and explored in depth.

Chapter Eight focuses on the final stage in Rambo's model, Consequences, and is positioned to look in depth at the experiences of people one year to eighteen months after becoming Catholic. This chapter presents some of the challenges faced by the research participants as they adjust to life as new Catholics, looking specifically at the period of Mystagogy and the reality of integration with the community, imbibing Catholic culture and nurturing a newly established Catholic identity.

Finally, this thesis concludes with a review of the major findings of this research, highlighting in particular the role and impact of the existing conversion motifs, augmented by my new branch motif 'Affective Synthesis', which I propose, brings a new and original aspect to the Lofland and Skonovd's research. Finally, this chapter concludes with key recommendations relating to the Church's response to the

experience of contemporary Catholic conversion, which have emerged from this research and which I intend to contribute to the ongoing dialogue regarding evangelisation and mission.

## **2 CHAPTER TWO: Conversion in Context: The socio-cultural background of contemporary British Catholicism**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Dramatic change has taken place in the religious landscape of England and Wales over the last 30 years with the proportion of Britons identifying as Christian falling from 55% to 43% between 1983 and 2015. Recent statistical data reflects that just over half the population (52%) now classify as ‘Nones’, people who say they do not belong to any religion. Over two thirds of the population (66%) do not attend religious services except for occasions such as baptism, weddings and funerals (Bruce and Voas 2019:21). Religious decline has been shown to be denominational, with two religious parents having only a 50/50 chance of passing on faith to their children. With the transmission of faith in serious trouble, retention is highest amongst adults with no religion and only 6% of people with no religious upbringing are found to acquire religion later in life (Bruce and Voas 2019:22).

Statistically, the likelihood and occurrence of Catholic conversion in contemporary British society is low; current data represents Catholics as displaying the weakest conversion rate with only 7.7% of current Catholics not brought up as such. The majority of converts have some background in other Christian denominations and the occurrence of converting individuals with no religious background is low. According to 2012-14 data from the British Social Attitudes survey, 8% of self-identifying Catholics are converts; slightly over 1% say they were raised with either No religion, or in a Non-Christian religion (Bullivant 2015:12).

For every person who chooses to become Catholic, ten will leave the faith, discarding their previous religious identity to become part of a growing sociological group of ‘Nonverts’ (Bruce and Voas 2019:17). Secularising trends in Western Europe echo the shrinking landscape of religiosity in the UK. Current research exploring religious affiliation across Europe confirms the majority of 16 to 29-year-olds across the continent do not adhere or identify with a specific religion, the Czech Republic representing the least religious group for this category, with Holland, Sweden and Estonia following closely behind (Bullivant 2018:8,9). The reality portrays a concerning rate of attrition in terms of religious practice and identity and reveals the broad category of atheists, agnostics and those who answer, ‘none of the above’ on social-demographic questionnaires to represent ‘the fastest-rising group of people in our culture right now’ (Shimron 2018).

In modern culture, a simmering tension has become evident in the relationship between religion and the public sphere, in which a shared belief system can no longer be assumed. The relationship between Church and State is tenuous and this is evident in the day-to-day experiences: jurors are routinely offered a choice of sacred texts on which to swear in court, in addition to a non-religious ‘Affirmation’, a necessary adaptation of the British legal system to cater for both for ‘all faiths and none’, a phrase which has become increasingly ubiquitous in modern society (Crossley 2018:36; Williamson 2012). Although laws governing religious education in schools have remained largely unchanged since 1944, state school policies relating to the inclusion of daily acts of Christian worship have become a focus of public objection (Jones 2014). Woodhead asserts that such ‘entrenched Christian institutionalisation’ has, in many cases given way to a relationship of bargaining and negotiation in order to accommodate the legacy of a once dominant religious practice (2016:260).

Currently, the Catholic church finds itself amid one of the biggest crises to befall the faith in modern times. Investigations by the Pennsylvania Grand Jury uncovered the widespread sexual abuse of children by clergy in six dioceses in Pennsylvania and the systemic cover up of the abuse by senior church figures in the US and in the Vatican ( Pennsylvania Attorney General 2018). Whilst public perception of the Catholic Church remains low, a sense of anger and powerlessness has emerged amongst clergy in the realisation that the scandal has completely undermined extensive efforts to evangelise the disaffiliated and intolerant secular contemporary culture (Barron 2018). Guzik highlights the complete loss of trust in the institution of the Church for the Polish, a country which claims 92% of its population as Catholic (Guzik 2020).

Against such a bleak landscape, it is entirely possible that contemporary Christians face the very real prospect of moving forward as a diaspora community, dispersed and scattered within a culture which perceives religion with mistrust and in which religious identity and practice is relegated to the private realm (Dreher 2017:122). Some sociologists claim that the only foreseeable hope for the revival of the Church depends on the conversion of the non-religious, a phenomenon which is held to be rare (Bruce 2014:15).

The following discussion aims to lay some important foundations for this research, whose primary objective is to explore the profile, motivations and experiences of individuals choosing to become Catholic in the Archdiocese of Southwark in 2018. This chapter provides a contextualized view of 21st century culture in the UK, exploring the relationship between religion and society in light of dominant secularising trends and then moves to consider the perspectives and response of the Catholic Church. It is hoped that this primary overview will present a comprehensive background to



several necessary debates which undergird this thesis, whilst also providing an accurate framework through which the literature on religious conversion can be understood.

## **2.2 Understanding secularisation**

To describe a person, society or culture as ‘secular’ suggests no connection with religious or spiritual matters, holding instead concerns of a worldly or purely temporal nature. Secularism, as distinct from the process of secularisation, has a variety of definitions, not all of which are inimical to religion; Habermas presents the principle of an autonomous justification of morality and law, independent of the truths of revelation which are enshrined within the secular constitutional state and form the bases for political liberalism (Benedict XVI, Habermas, and Schuller 2005:25).

Although Gallagher identifies the term ‘secularisation’ as an ‘historically neutral process’ by which religious institutions relinquish social control in favour of encouraging a genuine human autonomy (1995:12), Dobbelaire brings welcome clarity to what scholars have observed is a multi-dimensional concept (2002:25). First, he relates the term to individual secularisation observed in the declining involvement and participation in churches and denominations, second, he asserts that societal secularisation is the separation of the influence of religion from the state and takes place both in a latent form and one of deliberate policy. Here, he cites the focused attempt by Durkheim in forcing the policy of laicisation of the French education system, and of Marx and Lenin between church and state. Finally, Dobbelaire asserts the concept of organisational secularisation which explores the response of organised religious groups to the changing values in society and the process of de-Christianisation. In effect, this represents the broad changes observed in churches, groups, sects, New Religious Movements (NRM) in relation to moral teachings, value systems and rituals, in attempts to conform with changing culture. (2002:25)

### **2.3 Historical development of secularisation theory.**

In terms of the historical development of secularisation theory, scholars fall into two distinct camps, some assert that religion hit a sudden obstacle emergent in the 1960's, a period characterised by a strong shift in values regarding freedom, equality and sexuality. This represents a 'rapid and recent' model of secularisation (Bruce 2014:13; Brown 2001:30). Others such as Steve Bruce, (Britain's 'main spokesman' (Bruce 2020:vii) for secularisation theory, whose own influential account, elaborated over a number of works, I will draw on below) acknowledge a long, historical trajectory of decline most closely associated with the nineteenth century (Longhurst 2018:12).

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the emergence of the Enlightenment period, also known as the Age of Reason, which was characterised by rapid social, cultural and technological change and saw an explosion in philosophical thought and scientific development. The process of the separation of church and state was heavily influenced by philosophers such as John Locke, who earlier in the seventeenth century had instituted the adoption of the social contract, causing people to become increasingly dissatisfied with government authority over individual conscience.

With the advent of modernisation, the provision of social functions previously under the exclusive domain of the Church such as health care, education, welfare and social control, were separated and provided through specialist institutions. As Marx observed in his theory of class formation, when social functions become increasingly differentiated, individuals must fight for position and power amongst competing social groups. Fuelled by the new work ethic of the Protestant Reformation, Weber (1864-1920) expounded his theory of rationalisation which he saw as responsible for transforming the world, through bureaucratic systems which would place human beings as the centre of control, thus displacing religion with a new value-system (2002:26,27).

In contrast with Durkheim, who believed that religion fulfilled an important role in social order which could again become prominent, Weber believed that religion had been permanently lost in the processes of modernisation (Warner 2010:20).

Later proponents of classic secularisation theory such as Wilson asserted that any occurrence of religious revival supported and confirmed the trajectories of secularisation (1982:149). In his view, revival movements that were related to declining religiosity, were unsustainable in terms of their fervour and longevity and dependent on shared contexts and belief systems. Berger further emphasised the importance of shared systems and structures in providing a 'sacred canopy' from which religion draws its dominant plausibility structures. Religious belief, he contends, is contingent on social support for its existence (1967:35-43).

Bruce makes similarly stark predictions for the eventual and certain demise of religion; he asserts, 'Britain in 2030 will be a secular society' (2003:60). He contends that modern society has entered a new phase of 'late secularisation', displaying three distinctive characteristics which are unique to contemporary culture: the shared stock of religious knowledge is small, religion is carried by groups with a narrow demographic and finally that religion has acquired a poor, public reputation. The gap between religious groups, the 'carriers' of faith and the non-religious is widening significantly; he suggests that the five predominant groups known for their religiosity provide a socially narrow demographic which in turn prevents the non-religious from identifying the requisite 'socially effective bonds' necessary for conversion (Bruce 2014:16).

#### **2.4 Role of the Church in contemporary culture**

The modernisation and industrialisation of the 19th century brought the promise of wealth and prosperity for the individual; however it also began to highlight areas of

inequality, poverty and the potential for exploitation. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII addressed these areas of socio-economic and political conflict, with specific consideration towards the need for Church and State to identify, discern and protect the dignity and integrity of the individual in light of both scientific and technological advancement,

The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion of industrial pursuits and the marvellous discoveries of science; in the changed relations between masters and workmen; in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals, and the utter poverty of the masses; the increased self-reliance and closer mutual combination of the working classes; as also, finally, in the prevailing moral degeneracy. (*Rerum Novarum*, 1)

Addressed to the Catholic Bishops, Pope Leo XIII set out a framework within which the Church could aspire to monitor and safeguard the rights and dignity of the human person; the voice of the Church is strong with a detectable expectation for influence and adherence to the new socio-economic conditions governing the welfare and rights of the worker - private property, the role of the state, the worker's right to a just wage, and the importance of worker associations. The Church, he determines must retain its right to speak on social issues and to be heard.

Keenly aware of the challenges of contemporary culture and a recognition of the delicate balance required to maintain the relationship between the Church and society, the documents of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 reveal an insightful reading of the then cultural context. In the document *Ad Gentes* (AG), a greater sense of urgency is detectable on the part of the Church to bring the Gospel message to those for whom it is new, recognising that for effective transmission, it must 'implant' itself amongst the various cultural groups of the time (AG 6). *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) reflects the cultural shift away from religion and a developing 'hostility' towards it, a predisposition to phenomenism and agnosticism, and a humanist approach which is described as being 'purely earthbound' (GS 57). Signalling a more positive and inductive process of

listening attentively to the signs of the times GS sets out a roadmap for the five most essential elements for human development:

- the cultivation of intellectual and physical gifts;
- mastery of the earth through research and interdisciplinary work;
- the need to humanise the dominant traditions and institutions in society;
- freedom of spiritual self-expression for human hope;
- the preservation and communication of inspiring visions for the ‘progress of humankind’; (Gallagher 2003:3).

Pope Paul VI’s 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) speaks to the cultural rift between the Gospel message and the dominant value systems, referring to this split as ‘the drama of our time, just as it was of other times’ (EN 20). The last phrase is indicative an awareness of the cyclical tendency of culture to fall out of step with the Church, its moral values and teachings and the duty of the church to propose a counter-response. Since Christianity is not identical to culture, or constructed by it, the task for the Church is to find effective ways to build relationship which are capable of permeating the various strata of cultures and sub-cultures which comprise the wider community. The urgency and energetic style of EN derives from the inherent knowledge that if the Gospel is to be alive and active, then it must work with culture since this is the key zone within which human beings can grow and flourish. Significantly, EN must be seen as an integral part of the corpus of modern papal social teaching since it sees witness and teaching on social justice as an intrinsic part of evangelisation (EN 31).

Fifteen years after EN, St John Paul II published his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), in which he urged a renewal and reinvigoration of the Church’s missionary

activity. He identified that in the ‘new springtime’ of Christianity (RM 86), a certain negative tendency has become ingrained in the Christian psyche, perhaps in response to the contemporary challenges of attempting to evangelise in an increasingly secular society.

St John Paul II outlines the challenges of bringing God’s Word to a society which believes it can exist without God and again, the term ‘urgent’ is applied to the task ahead, ‘The number of those who do not know Christ and do not belong to the Church is constantly on the increase. Indeed, since the end of the Council it has almost doubled. When we consider this immense portion of humanity which is loved by the Father and for whom he sent his Son, the urgency of the Church’s mission is obvious’ (RM 3).

Implicit in the theory of secularisation is the assertion that as humanity develops and progresses, there is a declining need for God amid a growing sense of autonomy. In recognition of socio-cultural challenges facing the church, Vatican II produced the document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC) which made extensive provision for the Christian initiation of adults (RCIA),

The catechumenate for adults, comprising several distinct steps, is to be restored and to be taken into use at the discretion of the local ordinary. By this means the time of the catechumenate, which is intended as a period of suitable instruction, may be sanctified by sacred rites to be celebrated at successive intervals of time. (SC 64; RCIA 64).

Yamane suggests that the establishment of the rite represented a ‘return to the sources’, implementing an approach which restored the richness and cohesion of the first catechetical model for adult initiation., a move, which he contends is progressive rather

than retrograde (Yamane 2014:28). A detailed exposition of the RCIA can be found in Chapter Three of the thesis (pp71-74)

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Church emphasised the need to embrace and engage modern culture. However, the growing sense of urgency is palpable in Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) which talks of the need to address the complex needs of contemporary society within a framework of 'ecclesial renewal' (EG 27-33). A discernible shift is evident in the conciliar consciousness regarding the challenges that modernity brings for the individual and the community and a growing recognition that although the process of secularisation can help to 'liberate and purify' faith, it can also foster a withdrawal of religion to a private sphere, a decline of religious values and a loss of Christian belonging (Gallagher 1995:12).

## **2.5 Deforestation of the Christian memory**

Elucidated by the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the power of culture and its impact on the individuals and the community cannot be understated when exploring the issue of religious decline. In 19<sup>th</sup> century society, the broad understanding of high culture was characterised through fine art, architecture and classical music and carried connotations of elitism and aspiration which cultural critic Matthew Arnold termed the 'pursuit of perfection' (Gallagher 2003:13). However in 1871, British anthropologist Edward Tylor asserted a more subjective approach which acknowledged the multifarious and often invisible factors which gives culture its persuasive power,

'Culture or civilisation is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society' (Tyler 1871:I,1)

Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan defines culture in the following terms, 'A culture is a set of meanings and values informing a common way of life, and there are as many

cultures as there are distinct sets of such meanings and values' (1972:301). This definition provides a useful yardstick against which the position of religion can be found on the contemporary cultural horizon.

Socio-cultural factors such as increasing geographical and social mobility (higher education, familial mobility, rising divorce rates and blended families) have served to loosen the connection between place, family and inherited faith. Many people no longer have a working knowledge or understanding of the basic tenets of Christianity; the Church concurs that what is at stake in contemporary culture is a loss of spiritual heritage and of the more traditional tools of transmission.

There has been a significant shift in communication within the social-media friendly, celebrity obsessed culture; religious terminology is failing to transmit central dogma effectively, as it once did, instead sounding arid, dry and at odds with colloquial references. Cardinal Danneels asserts that basic familiarity and knowledge of Christianity has faded significantly enough to prefigure an eventual 'deforestation of Christian memory' (Greaves 2011). As a lecturer in sociology for over forty years, Bruce recounts his personal observations of a key, conceptual shift amongst his students which has become evident over time 'In my lectures on recruitment to new religious movements, I could then use the phrase 'Pauline conversion', now I have to explain who Paul was and how he was converted' (2014:14). The apparent loss of Christian language, memory and transmission reflects the profound reality that religion no longer holds a place of relevance in modern culture, and the historical and traditional values and meanings no longer inform a common way of life.



## **2.6 Not a crisis of faith, but a crisis of culture (Gallagher 2003)**

Culture has developed an inherent power to influence and craft the public reception of religion either positively or negatively and the impact on the individual and collective faith journey cannot be ignored. A snapshot of recent media coverage displaying emotive and provocative headlines such as '6 Reasons Religion is Dying' (DK 2020), 'Religion Declining, Secularism Surging' (Zuckerman 2016) and 'Christianity as default is gone': the rise of a non-Christian Europe' (Sherwood 2018) demonstrate a willingness to reject religion as an integral part of a commonly held identity.

Gallagher (2003:6) suggests that the global contemporary world is now in the throws of an era of postmodernity, a cultural and historical tendency which has been developing from the 1960's and 70's. Establishing focus in the war against terrorism, post-modern culture assumes a visible and tangible identity, with roots in technology and economics and driven by market forces. What is reflected in the reception of faith in modern culture is a profound shift in approach, an eagerness to see faith and religion removed from the public sphere in what Carter describes as a 'Culture of Disbelief', whereby the role of religion is marginalised to such a point that it is rendered impotent. For those who still wish to practice their faith, they are corralled to exist in a largely privatised spiritual realm, in a space where they feel more at home as 'Netigens' than 'Citizens' (Carter quoted in Gallagher 2003:6). In her research, Neumaier reports the increasing use of internet forums to create a public and private space for religious expression; alluding finally to the sense that internet use within religion is leading to a more privatised role of faith (Neumaier 2016).

Gallagher recognises that culture has massive potential to both humanise and de-humanise, a view shared by St John Paul II who recognised that contemporary culture could be viewed as an 'ambiguous phenomenon', evoking both promise and concern to

the Church, who effectively exists in the margins and the boundaries of society (2003:4). However, it is precisely within this marginalised territory that Christianity is able to formulate a cogent response to culture by awakening its consciousness to its own non-neutrality. Christianity is not synonymous with culture or constructed by it but must retain its ability to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the aim of discernment and the hope of transformation, 'At the heart of every culture lies the attitude a person takes to the greatest mystery, the mystery of God' (St John Paul II 1991; *Centesimus Annus* 24).

## **2.7 A 'spirituality of seeking'**

Hornsby-Smith and Lee purport that in terms of religious identity, many distant and former Catholics still identify as such even with the explicit recognition that their faith is irrelevant to their lives. They assert this to be matter of association,

'...an identity badge worn by a distant supporter of the people who call themselves Catholic, with or without actual association with the institution or its beliefs' (1979:178).

Woodhead concurs that cultural pluralism and liberalism in the UK has contributed to the rise of the 'Nones' (Woodhead 2016:245). She suggests that by maintaining strong positions on sexuality, gender, marriage and contraception, the Church has wedged a 'values gap' into society, 'It's not that Britain has become less religious, it's that religion has become more so' (2016:256).

Additionally, Woodhead asserts that the growing secular population is not as sharply defined as once thought. Contemporary 'Nones' are not vehemently secular or atheist but actively resist being labelled or associated with institutional religion. Many adhere to a generalised belief in God and engage in prayer and spiritual practices, the identifier

of 'no religion' is perceived as a useful, positive choice but as Woodhead observes, is in danger of being used as a 'demographic dustbin category', obscuring the real picture (2016:258, 261). Hout's research which shows that people who identify as being non-religious are not consistent in their affiliation status, a phenomenon labelled as liminality. Holt asserts that this liminal status presents among people raised as conservative or mainline Protestant and Catholic (Hout 2017). Far from being disinterested in religion, what has emerged is a 'spirituality of seeking' for many individuals living in a culture where place, family and faith have been disrupted (Wuthnow 1998:3). This finding was supported in Day's research exploring the role of individualised belief without the need for active participation in a community context (2013:8).

## **2.8 Subcultural identity theory**

Having identified a more nuanced and complex picture of the role that religion and spirituality play in people's lives, the discussion now moves to consider the potentiality for religion to persist and even thrive in a culture dominated by pluralist and individualist value-systems. In his study of US Protestant evangelism, Smith demonstrates tangible examples where religion continues to flourish in the midst of modern society offering a multitude of choice and opportunity; he posits their success alongside other groups which despite their relative strength experience decline (Smith et al. 1998:90). Smith's findings led him to develop his theory of subcultural identity of religious strength which argues that human beings are driven not by utility maximisation but by a need to pursue meaning and to cultivate a sense of belonging. In pursuit of higher meaning, human beings search for a resonant narrative or story that helps them make sense of the world,

For all our science, rationality and technology, we moderns are no less makers, tellers, and believers of stories that make sense of our existence, history and purpose, than were our forebears at any other time in human history (Smith 2003:64; also see Everton 2018: 35)

In pluralist societies religions survive, Smith suggests, when they embed themselves in sub-cultures which offer a collective identity which appeals to their followers' search for meaning and belonging. This suggests that individuals can achieve stronger religious identities through decisive commitment and individual choice rather than through ascription. This is a condition which is characteristic of modernised society, that the individual choice to belong to a specific religion or belief system becomes more valuable and precious, strengthening the new identity as an intentional and not an inherited choice and is echoed in the literature (Richardson 1985:167-171; Yamane, 2014:3). In his study of English Catholics, Hornsby-Smith asserts the movement away from 'religio-ethnic identity to one of voluntary religious commitment' and the more gradual, fluid transformation of developing a distinctive religious identity (quoted in Harris 2013:76,77).

## **2.9 Secularisation theory – critiques and counter trends**

Predictions of the death and demise of faith have existed for over three hundred years (Stark 2000:250). Despite such predictions, emerging research as highlighted previously, points towards the persistence of religion in the face of secularising trends, casting doubt over the validity and credibility of secularisation theory. As a sociological construct, critics of secularisation theory suggest that it relies heavily on the 'grand narratives' of rationalisation, bureaucratisation, rationalism to support its predictions, which inevitably render it vulnerable and highly contingent (Warner 2010: 42). An outworking of this theme contends that secularisation theory is 'unfalsifiable' since it fails to take account of contradictory evidence of religious revival, church growth or the rise in prominence of religion in countries such as the US. Any such

evidence is de-emphasised or subsumed within the very prescriptive approach of the secularisation paradigm because it fails to support the master narrative (Warner 2010: 41).

Supporting evidence can be drawn from a tranche of new and emerging research which challenges the predictions of widespread religious decline. Recent UK research by Goodhew et al, highlights significant evidence of church growth in and around London over the last forty years, in what they purport to be the working out of a process of 'desecularisation' (2019:3). Exploring the expansion of church growth in London from the ground up, what can be observed is the development of a mosaic of religious groups which reflect the diversity of a vibrant, pluralist culture. Christianity in London has been boosted by the groundswell of immigrants and the substantial impact of black and ethnic minority churches, none of which seem to be adequately accounted for within the traditional evaluations of secularisation theory.

Goodhew asserts that links with areas of religious vitality, economic prosperity, and diverse regional disparity in relation to the geographical distance away from thriving, bustling cities challenge the grand narrative of secularisation. As such, it becomes clear that the decline in Christianity in the UK at least lacks the uniformity and consistency to adequately bolster a strong secular narrative; as Goodhew and colleagues assert, regionalised exploration has the potential to present a more accurate picture of local religiosity within specific groups and communities and can contribute to the broader dialogue from this perspective (2012:15).

Goodhew's findings present an encouraging counter trend of religious vitality, resilience and persistence. As he rightly asserts, 'The ultimate test for secularisation theory is not what opinion polls say but what is happening out on the street' (2012:4).

Secularisation theory purports that the declining trends in Western European religiosity are normative for all, inferring a superiority to which other societies aspire; critics argue that secularisation theory therefore occupies an inherently Eurocentric narrative. As an important counter argument, Inglehart and Baker suggest instead that a spectrum of diversity can exist between nations and within groups of nations, each one shaped by their own distinctive cultural heritage (2000:49). Challenging the prevailing view that modernisation must automatically lead to convergence and homogeneity, Eisenstadt proposes the concept of ‘multiple modernities’ which can arise from the matrix of cultural and institutional formations from within different socio-economic contexts (Eisenstadt 2000). Davie embraces Eisenstadt’s understanding of modernisation as a ‘story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs’ (2002:157).

Religion may not therefore fit as neatly into a grand narrative space as proponents of secularisation maintain and has potential to display a greater flexibility and fluidity in responding to the prevailing culture. In his later renouncement of the validity of secularisation theory, Berger highlights the important role of the Catholic Church in the process of democratisation in Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Philippines since the Second Vatican Council; it is possible therefore to assert a new relationship between religion and secular culture, one in which religion can play a key part in the fundamental rights of human beings through a process of interpretation and dialogue, existing alongside secularising process in a complementary way (Berger 2008)

Exploration of the critiques of secularisation theory has revealed a far more complex and nuanced look at the various ways in which religion can persist and survive.

Although contemporary patterns of religious practice reflect a downward linear trajectory, human beings rarely conform to such neat, one-dimensional categorisation

and neither, it is suggested, does the Church. Currently, British society is in the midst of extreme European political and economic uncertainty, not to mention (beginning in the final year of this project) a global pandemic. The global devastation caused by the Coronavirus pandemic has caused a wider debate as to the potential effect not only on the remaining faithful but the religiously indifferent majority. Academics and scholars now contemplate whether the virus will trigger a religious resurgence in line with previous experiences of national and global crises such as the Second World War or lead to an equally powerful fracture in religious practice and adherence. (Bullivant 2020:66-72; Coppen 2020). Berger is keen to point out that human beings continue to be stubbornly religious, using the platform of democracy to hold their ground in the public square. He recognises that fundamentalists will always emerge from both the religious and the secular, defending the core values of civilisation, the political system and of moderation, a task which he maintains is difficult but not impossible in the contemporary climate (Berger 2008).

### **2.10 Conclusion: Conversion in Context**

This discussion has attempted to provide a contextualised view of 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, against which the subject of religious conversion to Catholicism can be fully explored. Although the timeframe for secularisation remains contentious, there is little doubt over the loss of influence of religion in modern society and the impact of this waning relationship between Church and state on declining religious practice. What the discussion emphasises however is the tendency for secularisation theory to rely heavily on grand narratives to predict the long-term outcomes on contemporary religious practice, to present religiosity in black and white terminology, centring discussion around the sensationalist extremes of revival and growth, decline and fall, thereby attracting the greatest attention.

It is suggested that religion, specifically Christianity, is not always sympathetic to sociological bracketing and can be unpredictable in its ability to react as well as to act across different cultural contexts and challenges. By exploring the conciliar response of the Catholic Church historically, it is possible to see a strong desire on the part of the Church to retain its cultural voice and to advocate on behalf of the human person against the challenges of living in a modernised world. Following the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the Church recognised the potentially dehumanising effects of the secular age and saw that it must act with urgency to recognise the needs of individuals and that to do this effectively, it is imperative to accurately understand the cultural context.

Against a backdrop of fading Christian memory and generational loss of religious literacy, the discussion focused on the challenge of maintaining a religious practice and identity within a highly pluralised and individualised culture. It was established that although contemporary people may not claim a specific religious identity, this is less to do with a loss of religion and more to do with a resistance to being pigeon-holed into a particular religious box. In trying to address the somewhat unstructured spiritual needs of the modern age, it is possible that appealing directly to the inherent desire amongst human beings to belong, to find meaning and to find a cogent narrative which tells the story of their identity, will provide an important signpost towards cultural and religious identity.

Having presented this contextualised portrait of contemporary British culture and the decline in religious practice, belief and observance, the following chapter reviews the prevailing literature on religious change and transformation. The discussion draws on contemporary sociological, psychological, historical and ethnographic sources in order to provide a presentation of contemporary Catholic conversion from a micro and macro



level and within the wider socio-cultural context. In this way, the following chapter seeks to provide a solid foundation upon which to frame and position the findings of my research.

### 3 CHAPTER THREE: Literature Review

‘As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. (Acts 22:6-7, NRSV)

The New Testament account of St Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus has been considered by many as the prototypical conversion narrative (Rambo 1993:15). As a well-educated Jewish Pharisee who was only too familiar with the early Jesus movement, also known as ‘The Way’, and the dangers which it posed, Saul was responsible for the widespread persecution of Christians in first-century Jerusalem. Luke’s account in Acts describes Saul making his way to Damascus to retrieve the early Christian dissidents to bring them to trial, when he is suddenly knocked from his horse by a beam of divine light. The seventeenth century painting by Caravaggio characterising the event, depicts Saul in a moment of vulnerable submission, physically lower than his horse, his arms outstretched, eyes closed, as he hears the voice of Jesus (Hornik and Parsons 2016). The call of Christ brings ‘radical newness’ to Saul, who is baptised a few days later and, armed with a new identity, begins a period of intense missionary activity, which he carries out amid persecution and imprisonment until the end of his life (Acts 9:18, NRSV). This traditional conversion narrative perfectly introduces the Mystical conversion model – the total transformation of mindset, sudden and dramatic revelation, divine vision and voices and a permanent adherence to the new way of thinking, thus brings the narrative story arc to completion.

Historically, St Paul's conversion has been a strong cultural reference point, traditionally embedded in the English language to refer to a turning-point or life-changing experience (Farlex, 2017). It now appears however that terms such as the 'Pauline' or 'Damascene' conversion no longer carry the same recognition in contemporary culture (Bruce 2014:12). With just over one half of contemporary British adults claiming no religious affiliation, and a growing proportion of British children being brought up likewise, it would seem that a 'Road to Damascus' moment is a lingering remnant not only of British vernacular but also the collective Christian memory, in the light of the process of secularisation.

### **3.1 Conversion research – peaks and troughs**

The peaks and troughs of interest in conversion literature provide interesting barometers of religious health and vitality. The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw conversion literature peak in response to the increasing number of new religious movements. Bruce contends that from a sociological perspective, interest in conversion is motivated through a desire to understand large scale religious change. Public interest is generally highest, he purports, when global events spark religious resurgence such as the collapse of communism or the spread of Pentecostalism in Latin America and Africa. It becomes politically, socially and economically pertinent to identify the forces and patterns of behaviour which motivate people to make specific religious choices (Bruce 2018:166). In his research exploring post 1900's British church adherence data, Bruce is keen to correct the long-standing assumption however that religious resurgence and vitality is correlated with 'intense moments of political, economic and socio-cultural crisis' (Bruce and Voas 2016:26-43).

Whilst Bruce speculates that scholarly interest in conversion has lost its shine, and become weary in much the same way that the 'once and for all' conversion model of St

Paul may have lost its shine, the innovative insights associated with times of religious vitality and resurgence have also become weary, ‘After all, there are only so many times one can have the passive versus active, or structure versus agency, argument’ (Bruce 2018:161).

### **3.2 A contemporary appetite for conversion**

The downward trend of secularisation and widespread religious decline has been reflected in the paucity of conversion research and sporadic academic interest over the last forty years. Of the 250 articles in 25 issues of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* after 2000, only two were focused on conversion and one of these was written by a psychologist (Bruce 2018:161). Hornsby-Smith and Lee concur with this observation, noting that empirical studies remain limited and no major studies of Roman Catholicism conducted over the last 40 years. Significantly they assert the lack of research-based analysis relating to the assimilation of immigrant groups, generational studies regarding belief and practice and the role of women in the church, the formation and training of clergy, the impact of secularisation and the decline in influence of Catholic organisations in public life (1979: 6).

Despite widespread religious decline and the relentless march of secularisation however, the dramatic conversion of contemporary, public figures is still capable of commanding a space in the public arena. A cursory YouTube search on Catholic conversion reveals a selection of video titles such as ‘How I grew up atheist and ended up Catholic’ (206,077 views) (Fulwiler 2016), ‘Why I [#Converted](#) to the [#Catholic #Church](#) - Part 1 & 2’ (106,346 views) (Holdsworth 2017), ‘From Agnosticism to Catholicism: My Conversion Story (Part One)’ (41,604 views) (Fradd 2018) and finally ‘WHY I’M BECOMING CATHOLIC (From an Ex-Protestant)’ (388,990 views) (Hyatt 2018). Also of significance is the enduring popularity of

EWTN's long standing programme 'The Journey Home' which features compelling testimonies of converts to Catholicism, supported through the work of The Coming Home Network (EWTN). One of the larger news items from 2019 comes from the Christian conversion experience of pop and cultural icon Kanye West (Lee 2019).

Arguably, a key focus for social media coverage of religious conversions lies in the story, the narrative account of the journey to religious belief and in the awareness that spiritual transformation is rarely attributed to a 'once and for all' model and is instead reliant on a diverse number of factors, influences and layers of interpretation. Whilst compelling and attractive, Gustav Bardy contends that, in reality, sudden and dramatic conversions are exceptions rather than the rule, 'the only interesting conversions are those which are resolute and deliberate, and which have their origins in self-reflection' (Quoted in Kling 2014:605).

The conversion of St Augustine is a particularly helpful illustration of this point. St Augustine is often said to have experienced a single moment of enlightenment after reading Romans 13:13. He explains, 'in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled' (Brown 2000:101). Tempting as it may be to focus on this revelatory moment as the precise instant that conversion take place, Augustine's own autobiography reveals this to be the culmination of a spiritual journey spanning years, and the result of a series of pivotal factors which ultimately brought him to faith – the social influence of significant individuals in his life, his intellectual pursuit of Scripture, and his attraction to the central teachings of Christianity. Even the popular literary style typical of fourth century spiritual writing would provide an additional layer of interpretation through which his conversion is expressed and understood (Stendahl quoted in Kling 2014:602).

Literature arising from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century reveals an increasing desire to understand religious conversion from a socio-cultural perspective as distinct from a theological one (Ross 2011; Harmon 2019). This drive to understand and give expression to the phenomenon of individual religious change is reflected in the ongoing tension between the desire to categorise and order conversion narratives into identifiable patterns and trends, without losing the central connection of the individual (Kling 2014:599).

### **3.3 New conversion research – a clarion call**

This literature review aims to present a cogent evaluation of the extent to which it is possible to categorise and pattern religious behaviour and spiritual transformation in a way that is both accessible and helpful both for those seeking to become Catholic, and those assisting them to do so. Adopting an inherently practical approach, my research aims to conclude with a series of recommendations which can be incorporated into current adult initiation programmes used by parishes in Southwark Archdiocese. In this way, this review aims to answer the clarion call from academia to ensure that conversion research adequately represents the Christian experience from a micro and macro level and presents the wider socio-cultural context (Lofland and Sknonovd 1981: 374-5; Rambo 1983:26-30). As Kling contends, ‘The challenge ahead is to move.... to a contextually sensitive, historical, and thematic survey of the complex phenomenon we call Christian conversion.’ (2014:622)

Finally, although this literature review is broadly focused on the early, pre-decision stage of spiritual enquiry, it will also explore the realm of conclusion, consequence and results. Bruce suggests that for many researchers, a lack of time, money and resources mean that they are unable to capture and express the arc of conversion experience in all its fullness. This review aims to reveal a growing body of literature which speaks of

moving beyond the ‘sales pitch’ or the initial phases of the conversion process to think through the impact and ramifications of religious change both for the individual and the broader, evangelising agenda of the Church. In the same way that opportunities are missed for evangelising the non-religious and the non-affiliated, recent research reveals key gateway moments in which evangelisers are missing the chance to build and grow intentional disciples (Weddell 2012). Spending time in exploration of the consequential results of religious conversion, there is a growing recognition that whilst it is important to fan the flames of religious enquiry, there is a responsibility which is incumbent on all those involved in adult initiation, to see the process through to completion in one sense, but to recognise this only as the beginning of the journey in another.

### **3.4 Structure of review**

With an awareness that the spectrum of religious conversion experience is broad and expansive, it becomes significant at this stage to define the parameters and scope for this review. The main aim of this review is to present a cogent exploration of Christian conversion, both in terms of its historical development and the contemporary framework in which it now operates, to identify gaps in current research which can be addressed through the original findings in this study.

There is a popular saying within business management often attributed to statistician W. Edwards Deming which states , ‘If you can’t measure it, then you can’t manage it’ (Prince 2018:1,2); in view of the forward-facing, evangelising approach of this research, a central theme of this review will be to evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of using sociological models to ascribe to religious conversion experience a type, nature and character which is distinctive and relatable for the contemporary British Catholic context.

As a foundation for this work, the discussion will explore in depth the various factors, inducements and attractions which influence people to pursue religion and to explore this from both a macro and micro level. The discussion will explore the role of social networks, affective social bonds and rational choice theory, in addition to issues relating to religious identity and the process of identity formation. The role of initiation rites and ritual will be evaluated for a contemporary context, drawing on faith development theory as a potential way of understanding religious conversion through a life-stage model. The application of more recent models to evaluate the conversion experience in relation to process and stages will be explored and specifically will focus on Rambo's seven-stage approach (1993:18,168-9). In this way, I hope to augment and develop the work of Lofland and Skonovd in a way that can be directly applied to the findings of this research.

The review will continue by defining the major terms used in the following discussion and to investigate the ways in which the word 'conversion' is used and understood first, within the broader context of the three major Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity and then more specifically to explore the concept of adult initiation in Christianity and in the Catholic tradition. This initial exploration will involve in-depth historical exposition of the historical process and development of Christian conversion in first century Jerusalem and will then move to consider the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, and its close relationship with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Finally, a critique will be presented of its implementation, delivery and reception within modern Catholic formation.

### **3.5 Definition of key terms**

The original word for conversion in Hebrew was *Shubh* and this was used to refer to the process of turning back, restoration or repentance; *Shubh* was a common term employed



by the prophets urging individuals to remember and abide by God's covenantal promises. In Greek philosophy, to speak of conversion combined not only the interior process of self-reflective transformation but also an intentional change in moral behaviour and in virtue, so that the new way of thinking was carried into every aspect of an individual's life (Kling 2014:599). The term *metanoia* provided a much broader meaning than simple assent but signified the complete transformation of the course of life. In early first century Jerusalem, the term *epistrephein* would have been commonly used to refer to religious conversion.

In considering Christian conversion the term 'initiation' is often used to refer to the process by which churches prepare and catechise adults and children to know the teachings and practice of the Christian faith. The process of the initiation of adults involves a period of catechesis or instruction which moves the individual from the 'catechumenate' phase; the word catechumenate derives from the Greek word *katēkhoumenos*, which describes a person undergoing instruction prior to baptism. The Catechumenate phase is followed by the post-baptismal rites of Confirmation, culminating in reception of the Eucharist in the final sacrament of initiation, Holy Communion. The final phase of conversion involves a period of 'mystagogy', which derives from the Greek word *mystagōgós* and describes the interpretation and reflection on the mystery of initiation, whereby the new Catholic, also known as a 'neophyte', can begin to integrate their faith within the broader framework of their lives (Casey 2021).

The sociological literature reflects a general agreement that the word 'conversion', means the renouncement of one specific perspective or worldview, in favour of another (Kox et al 1991:227, Lofland, & Stark, 1965:862). Travisano uses the term 'conversion' to mean 'a radical reorganisation of identity, meaning, life', whilst Heirich asserts that it is 'the process of changing a sense of root reality' or a 'conscious shift in

one's sense of grounding' (Travisano 1970:600, Heinrich 1977:674; also see Lofland, Skonovd, 1981:375). Rambo places emphasis on the process of spiritual transformation, which he sees is cumulative, interactive and malleable in nature. He defines conversion as, 'turning from and to new religious groups, ways of life, systems of belief, and modes of relating to a deity or the nature of reality' (1983:3)

### **3.6 Conversion – a tool of analysis**

In the contemporary climate, Kling suggests that use of the term 'conversion' must account for the spectrum of religious change, encompassing total and complete adherence to the teachings of a belief system at one end and de-conversion or 'apostasy' at the other. In this way, Kling suggests that the term conversion is more than simply a definition but also a tool of analysis for the religious spectrum of affiliation and belief (2014:599).

Through her research into Islamic conversion, Nieuwkerk identifies her discovery of general dislike of the word 'convert' by many people and suggests this to be a matter of perspective and religious position (2014:668). Since the term conversion is suggestive of radical change, Nieuwkerk alludes to the inaccuracy of using this term to refer to a process whereby an individual comes to a realisation of a truth which has always existed within the individual, and which is very much viewed as natural in the Islamic tradition. In this way, Nieuwkerk prefers the use of phrases such as 'becoming' or 'embracing' or even the more ambiguous term 'reversion', a term used to mean returning to a previous state of belief. She contends, 'The concept 'convert' is thus considered an outsider's perspective, whereas embracing Islam or becoming Muslim is an insider's view' (2014:668).

Lofland and Stark broadly concur with the inference that the term conversion has been subject to imprecision and inconsistency and that a richer, more specific frame of reference must be identified,

‘the term conversion has been] muddied by inconsistent usage of Christian writers who use it to mean an ‘aroused concern’ of people who already accept the essential truth of the ideological system’ (1965:862).

Consideration of Christian conversion is nuanced across the denominations and is reflective of the different emphases within the New Testament model of repentance.

The example of St John the Baptist very much typifies the *shuv*-style Old Testament model, meaning to ‘turn back’ or ‘to be returned’ (Luke 15) and lies in parallel with the understanding of being ‘born again’. This New Testament understanding recognised repentance as the path to salvation through profession of faith In Jesus Christ, (as exemplified by John the Baptist) and involved a change of both heart and mind (Luke 3:11-14, NRSV) (Cole 2010). The person of Jesus would have negotiated these ideas practices and behaviours within the framework of Jewish categories of his time.

Rambo’s typology of Christian conversion helps to bring much needed clarity to the spectrum of religious belief and practice which now exists in modern society by categorising the potential pathways which people can travel on their journey to conversion. Rambo’s typology will be expounded later in the review (Rambo 1993:38-39). In their work, categorising the conversion motifs, Lofland and Skonovd rightly illuminate the need to be able to assess the authenticity of religious change and the discussion now moves to the varying levels of abstraction which operate within this process (1981:374-5).

### **3.7 Historical exploration of conversion**

#### **3.7.1 When is conversion deemed authentic and true?**

In medieval times, most people would become Christian through ‘acceptance or submission’, because they were told to or because their master or ruler had paved the way. Although Baptism represented a gateway to Christianity, belief was largely seen as superficial. Although by the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the pathways to Christian conversion had become increasingly diverse, greater emphasis was placed on intensification and with it, a stronger association with monasticism. The founding of the Cistercian order by St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) placed emphasis on ascetism and withdrawal from worldly existence as the only route to obtaining perfection in the imitation of Christ and full conversion of heart (Kling 2014:615).

This perception was challenged by the Dominican and Franciscan orders however, who opened the doors to this exclusive, cloistered world and brought Christ back to the urban sphere. Rather than being sequestered away from the rest of the world, conversion could be attained through the active pursuit of faith as a pathway to holiness and the apostolic life, the ‘*via apostolica*’, conveyed through catechesis, interpretation and baptism.

Conversion entered a spiritual reformation with the advent of medieval mysticism (Kling 2014). In the 15<sup>th</sup> century work *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis writes about his ‘first conversion’ experienced through monastic life and which points toward a shift towards an understanding of first and second conversions, of movements of the heart and soul which intensify existing belief (A Kempis 2003). Kling suggests that for devout Christians, true and authentic conversion was symbolised through a movement beyond mere affiliation or identification and required a second conversion of

the heart which would be ‘initiated, sustained and completed, if at all, by God’s actions’ (Kling 2014:616).

The 19th century saw the rise of two dominant schools of investigation into religious conversion, the ‘Harvard School’ led by William James, and the other by James’ former student, Granville Stanley Hall. Whilst Hall gave greater emphasis to the experimental and quantitative approach, James conducted extensive research into the psychology of religious experience as a transformative phenomenon and in 1907 published his seminal work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James believed that sufficient attention had been paid to the quantitative aspect of religiosity, asserting that it was only in qualitative research that it was possible to identify the wide and complex range of mechanisms at work in the ‘interior source’ of religious experience. James was clearly wary of expressing profound religious experience in abstract terms and was often critical of religious experience being evaluated through a purely theological lens,

One feels that in the theologian’s hands, they are only a set of titles obtained through mechanical manipulation of synonyms; verbliness has stepped into the place of vision, professionalism into that of life. Instead of bread we have a stone, instead of a fish, a serpent...what keeps religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of concatenated adjectives (James 1902:345).

James offered a profound insight into religious experience and made a substantial contribution towards conversion experience, which he felt should be judged with empirical criteria, *sui generis*, and based on perceived results and consequences, ‘Our practice is the only sure evidence, even to ourselves, that we are genuinely Christians’ (James 1902:10). This would concur with biblical teaching where we read that faith without works is dead, that people behave in line with their beliefs and the assertion that faith which is unsubstantiated by good deeds remains lifeless (James 2:14-26, Ephesians 2:10, John 15:1-17, NRSV).

In focusing solely on experience itself, James received criticism for failing to account for a broader panoply of causal factors such as the influence of others and the historical or social context. Many agreed that James had minimised these elements in favour of an over emphasis on psychological conditions (Kling 2014:607). It is perhaps interesting to note that from 1925-1975, the evangelical understanding of conversion focused heavily on the experiential, the degree of feeling which accompanied religious experience and is very much in line with James' insistence that conversion can really only be judged and understood through an empirical lens.

There is general agreement for the need to establish conceptual and methodological clarity when discussing the authenticity of conversion experience and that a key part of this process lies in the distinction between objective and subjective change. James Russell talks about the need to identify an 'objectivist standard' with which to measure Christian conversion, (Russell 1994:35; Kox et al 1991:228). This is a contentious area amongst conversion scholars, many of whom are unwilling even to propose an objective definition for fear that it will become exclusive and reductionist in its approach. What this does reveal however is the universal quest for a working definition of what conversion actually means but highlights the discrepancy between the desire and the efficacy of the outcome.

Those accompanying St Paul to Damascus would have been in no doubt that he had experienced a profound spiritual transformation, simply by observing the physical impact of the experience and his sudden change of behaviour. Objective change is easier to identify when someone begins to attend a new church, living out the new teachings in a practical way and visible way. The moment at which individuals undergo subjective spiritual change, however, is rather more difficult to ascertain. Through the foregoing discussion it has been possible to identify the wide spectrum of

measures through which conversion has been perceived as authentic throughout history – whether this be judged through visible results, practices and consequences, through ascetism, active faith and service or the ‘second conversion’ of intensified belief. These findings reinforce the need for an established baseline from which conversion experience can be judged and measured.

Through his research, Travisano provides a quantifiable measure which accounts for both objective and subjective change and in doing so, attempts to provide some clarity to this matter. He relates the subjective process of religious transformation to three characteristics which he suggests should be present to interpret true religious change as having taken place. The first characteristic relates to an individual’s ‘pervasive identity’, which is often evidenced by a change in perspective or worldview, secondly, an alteration to several aspects of the individual’s personality must be present and which (thirdly) is identified through prescribed ways of relating in various situations. For all three characteristics to be present, Travisano would suggest that a ‘radical change’ has taken place, described correctly as ‘conversion’. He is careful to explain that whilst objective and subjective change often happen concurrently, this is not always the case. Where a person objectively adopts the practices of a new belief system without experiencing subjective, interior change, Travisano would use the term ‘alternation’ (1970:594-606)

Travisano provides this model for assessing the authenticity of religious change both from an objective and subjective perspective and whilst a useful tool, Segal asserts that genuine religious conversion can only be interpreted correctly in relation to each specific belief system, ‘It is safe to say that each group defines what it considers to be its quintessential conversion pattern’ (Segal 2014:585).

### 3.7.2 Conversion – a comparative analysis

To illuminate Segal's proposition relating to 'quintessential conversion' and most specifically, how this relates to Catholic Christianity, it is helpful to present a comparative analysis of the religious traditions of Judaism and Islam; together with Christianity. The Abrahamic religions, who claim the greatest number of adherents globally (55% of the global population (PewForum.org. 2012), are monotheistic and claim descent from Judaism and the Israelite community who worshipped the God of Abraham.

Judaism originated in the Persian Empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC and conversion becomes evident in the post-exilic period after 538BC, when the Jewish people are freed from captivity in Babylon. In the First Temple period of the Old Testament, the word *géri'm* was used to describe Gentile strangers, who were allowed to offer sacrifices to God but were restrained from taking part in certain formal rituals (Exodus 12:43-45). It was firmly believed that Judaism was passed down exclusively through biological descent, however the OT account of Ruth stands as an important counter example. Ruth, a Moabitess living in the east of Jordan, finds herself widowed from her Israelite husband and subsequently joins her mother-in-law in returning to Judah. Ruth marries Boaz and as such, becomes not only a Judean but acquires a direct ancestral line to David and therefore to Jesus (Ruth 1:16-17). As Segal concludes,

No argument could have done as much as this charming story to attest that the border of the Israelite people was permeable, that interested non-Israelites could join themselves to Israel by choice. (Segal 2014:579)

Although Judaism is not a proselytising religion and does not actively seek to convert people, rabbinic Judaism was careful to ensure that converts to the faith were deeply committed and imposed a lengthy and extended period of individual study and



reflection to secure this commitment. The following speech by St Paul to King Agrippa, defending his rapid conversion to Christianity illustrates this point well,

And Agrippa said to Paul, 'In a short time you think to make a Christian!' And Paul said, 'Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am – except for these chains. (Acts 26: 24-29, NRSV)

Following the long process of study and reflection, the process of conversion would be completed by circumcision for male applicants and full immersion into a *mikvah* (ritual bath).

Alan Segal asserts that conversion to Judaism slowed during the development of Christianity and Islam but has experienced a resurgence in modern society (2014:580). The Ecclesiastical Court for the United Synagogue (US) in the UK (the Beth Din) considers applications from people who display a sincere desire to become Jewish, to uphold the regulations and practices of the faith and can demonstrate the correct motives driving their desire to convert. Despite the decline in religious affiliation, belief and practice in modern culture, the Jewish community rejects any attempts to compromise on the strict standards relating to conversion and display higher expectations of converts than members of the Jewish community.

Beth Din regulations state,

The Beth Din is aware, that the standards it requires for conversion create an anomaly insofar as converts are expected to be more religiously observant than the majority of the mainstream Jewish community, who tend to be more traditional than observant. While the lapse in religious standards within the wider Jewish community is a problem in its own right, affected to a large extent by the overwhelming secular society in which most Western Jews live, it cannot be a reason for lowering the universal standard expected of every Jew by the Torah (Bible) for one who wishes to enter the Jewish faith. (Beth Din 2020)

The requirements for conversion are based on a commitment to observe all *Mitzvot* or commandments. The potential convert must comply with the laws of observance

expected of every Jewish person and include observance of Shabbat (Sabbath), maintaining Jewish dietary laws (Kashrut) and those relating to Jewish marriage and family purity. There is an expectation that the potential convert will dedicate themselves to learn Hebrew, belong to, attend and follow Synagogue services and participate in the Jewish community. The general approach highlighted by the US is that such expectations in combination with the lengthy period of study preparation will provide a thorough grounding in the Jewish tradition and support the convert in adapting fully to Jewish life (Beth Din 2020).

The process for conversion can take between two to three years and is initiated by application and the provision of supporting documentary evidence explaining the individual's reasons for wanting to become Jewish. The application is considered and deliberated fully before the applicant is assigned a Dayan/Dayanim (a rabbinic judge) who will oversee and guide the conversion journey. After two meetings, the applicant will be assigned set readings and texts and will be expected to immerse themselves fully in the Jewish community. Towards the end of the conversion journey, the applicant will be expected to live with a Jewish family for a period of at least six months as a way of experiencing practical Judaism.

The final criterion for conversion is determined through an 'inward readiness' to fully embrace the Jewish faith and whilst many of the practical and outward expectations can help to point towards authenticity. The US suggests this is the hardest and yet most fundamental criteria for conversion, asserting that, 'The Beth Din will not finalise a conversion until it is reasonably satisfied that the candidate has in his or her heart of hearts resolved to commit to an orthodox Jewish life' (Beth Din 2020).

### 3.7.3 Islamic conversion

Islam is recognised as a missionary religion due to its universal nature and, in a similar way to Christianity has experienced rapid growth and achieved diversity amongst its converts. Whilst Jewish conversion displays an extended focus on enculturation into the traditions and practices of the community, Islamic conversion seems to display stronger links with the socio-economic and political landscape and with religious identity and is characterised through the process of ‘Islamization’ (Hermansen 2014:632).

Originating from the leadership of the Prophet Mohammed in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Islam was embraced by the majority of Arabian tribes and expanded beyond the Arabian Peninsula under the successorship of the four ‘Rightly Guided Caliphs (631-661AD). The remaining areas of sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and South East Asia experienced a more gradual conversion to Islam which took place much later. Mass conversions which followed those in the Middle East occurred around the 9<sup>th</sup> century and reached their climax in Iran (Hermansen 2014:632) At this time, conversions were closely related to social and political factors affecting individuals at the extremes of society: for those in positions of power and influence, conversion to Islam was politically motivated through attempts to appease the conquerors, whilst the poorest in society had little to lose from gaining a new identity through the faith.

Hermansen asserts that the process of ‘Islamization’ is closely linked with social, political and economic factors and with identity. The word ‘revert’ is preferred when describing an individual who has converted to Islam, to refer to the theological teaching that all souls recognise God in pre-eternity, through the Primordial Covenant (Qur’an 7:31). As such there is an understanding that embracing Islam means to reconnect with Allah as the source of truth and therefore the concepts of ‘remembrance’ (*dhikr*), return

(*rija*) and repentance (*tawba*) are central. Undergirded by the revelations of Moses and Jesus, Christians and Jews who become Muslim are perceived to have completed their spiritual journey, rather than renouncing their faith. The Qur'an speaks of the process of Islamic conversion as the guiding hand of God towards the ultimate truth, 'He found you lost and guided you' (93:7) and in this sense echo the parabolic teachings of Jesus regarding those who are lost, have gone astray (the Lost coin, Lost sheep and Prodigal Son found in Luke:15) and the will of God to bring humanity back to the right path (Ephesians 1:11-12; Hermansen 204:633; Alydreessy 2061:35)

Hermansen suggests that the historical development of Islam conversion features broad regional disparity due to social, political, economic and geographical factors and resists the pattern of one particular paradigm. In his research exploring conversion to Islam in the West, Kose found that for contemporary Americans, becoming Buddhist or Muslim were the two predominant religious choices; the profile of these religious converts was remarkably similar to those joining New Religious Movements and the motivating factors were emotionally and intellectually based. In his research, Poston found that the majority of converts to Islam were motivated through disillusionment with adolescent religious upbringing, and therefore would capture those in their late twenties who had invested a significant amount of time studying the teachings and engaging in self-reflection. (Kose and Poston quoted in Hermansen 2014:648)

In contrast to Judaism and Christianity, conversion to Islam requires very little pre-conversion preparation or instruction. All that is expected of the individual is the official proclamation of the *shahadah* (pledge of conviction of faith in Arabic) and translates, '*I bear Witness that there is no deity but Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is His Messenger*'. The pledge takes place in front of two witnesses, after which the individual is then expected to take on a Muslim name and to pursue an

Islamic course of some kind. Whilst there is evidence of some ritualization of Islamic conversion in the US, known as ‘Shadada rebirth celebrations’, amongst African-American congregations, Hermandsen contends that this is not usual and that the need for post-conversion support to integrate individuals into the Muslim community is even more pronounced 11(2014:653).

#### **3.7.4 Christian Initiation**

The baptism of Jesus, aged thirty, provides the earliest model of baptism. Jesus’ full immersion in the River Jordan would have been very much in keeping with the first century customs for ritual washing and bathing, as already discussed in relation to the Jewish ritual bath or *mikvah* (Matt. 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11, Luke 3:21–22; and John 1:31–34, NRSV). Johnson asserts that very few details about early Christian baptismal practice are known fully and suggests that early Johannine communities would have used foot washing as the earliest example of a baptismal rite (2015). In the first and second centuries, individuals would receive instruction and would fast for a few days before being baptised with cold, running water (Johnson 2015). Such New Testament sources support the view therefore that baptism followed intellectual assent, that conversion began with belief, could happen immediately on confession of faith (Acts 8:28, 16:33) and was completed in the ritual of baptism, ‘Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day’ (Acts 2:41, NRSV).

More details emerge regarding the incorporation of specific rites and rituals relating to initiation around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. According to Apostolic Tradition, the process of Christian conversion would have taken three years and involved a substantial period of questioning and self-reflection. The journey to conversion was challenging and precarious and, for those who reached the final stages, the process for baptism was

equally complex. Baptism would take place within the context of an all-night vigil which comprised: the renunciation of Satan, anointing with the 'oil of exorcism', three baptismal immersions following a specific creedal formula, post-baptismal anointing, the laying on of hands by the bishop within the assembly and second anointing and finally a kiss and celebration of the Eucharist. There is evidence from Tertullian, one of the early Church fathers, which suggests that the Eucharist was accompanied by cups of milk and honey, a connective symbol of entry to the Promised Land. (Johnson 2015)

In terms of the conversion process, Judaism and Christianity display a shared recognition of the importance of an extensive period of formation, study and interior reflection as a way of ensuring strong commitment and authenticity of spiritual transformation. This finding is contrasted with conversion to Islam which requires a simpler declaration of commitment with less emphasis on prior study and preparation but can place greater emphasis on community support after conversion has taken place, to strengthen and develop religious identity. Although there is little evidence for ritualization within Islamic conversion, the significance of rites and rituals in both Jewish and Christian conversion is central and this serves as a useful platform upon which to engage in deeper exploration of the development of the Christian initiation of adults.

### **3.7.5 The Catechetical lectures of St Cyril**

Christianity spread rapidly in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries and appealed to all echelons of society, including members of the intellectual elite and prestigious figures such as Emperor Constantine in 312 (Stark 1997:3). It was widely recognised that amongst the mass numbers coming forward for conversion, there were many presenting for conversion with mixed motives, who were often baptised without any formal catechesis. David Kling comments on the role of baptism as an early ritual process, 'the baptismal

process became instead the means of conveying a profound experience to the candidates in the hope of bringing about their conversion' (2014:618).

In response, St Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, wrote a series of catechetical lectures in 348 which sought to bring about conversion through a gradual process of teaching and symbolic enactment. The format of St Cyril's catechetical lectures presented a systematic process through which individuals could move gradually through the sacramental journey of initiation, from Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. The first eighteen of the lectures were introduced by a *Procatechesis* of welcome and addressed the catechumens and candidates, introducing the central dogmatic teachings of the Church (Schaff and Wace 1867). A central theme running through the corpus of St Cyril's homilies was the teaching that Baptism symbolised rebirth in Christ and as such, carried a strong and distinctive message for pagans and Judeo-Christians,

You have been caught in the nets of the Church (cf. Mt 13: 47). Be taken alive, therefore; do not escape for it is Jesus who is fishing for you, not in order to kill you but to resurrect you after death. Indeed, you must die and rise again (cf. Rom 6: 11, 14)... Die to your sins and live to righteousness from this very day (Procatechesis, 5).

The final homilies instruct upon the significance of the mystagogical element of the process of spiritual transformation, an opportunity for the newly baptised to reflect upon the sacraments received as the culmination of their journey and to mark the beginning of their new life as Christians. Incorporating the doctrinal, the moral and the mystagogical, St Cyril laid the groundwork for a comprehensive catechetical structure, providing a clear precedent for the contemporary process of adult initiation embedded within the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI suggests that St Cyril has provided a 'global catechesis' which allow the elements of spiritual transformation to 'explode' within the heart of the neophyte. He asserts, '... this is an

integral catechesis which, involving body, soul and spirit - remains emblematic for the catechetical formation of Christians today.' (Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI 2007)

As Christianity gained dominance in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, many churches shared their practices for adult initiation and this led to the process becoming standardised, displaying a common pattern and model which would significantly shape and influence Christian initiation. The following staged process became characteristic for adult initiation within the early Eastern church:

- (1) Celebration of Paschal Baptism and the connection with Lent as the time of pre-baptismal (daily) catechesis on Scripture, Christian life, and the Creed for the *photizomenoi* (those to be 'enlightened');
- (2) the use of scrutinies (examinations) and daily exorcisms throughout the period of final baptismal preparation;
- (3) the development of specific rites called *apotaxis* (renunciation) and *syntaxis* (adherence) as demonstrating a 'change of ownership' for the candidates;
- (4) the development of ceremonies such as the solemn *traditio* and *redditio symboli* (the presentation and 'giving back' of the Nicene Creed);
- (5) the interpretation of the pre-baptismal anointing as a rite of exorcism, purification, and/or preparation for combat against Satan;
- (6) the rediscovery and use of Romans 6 as the dominant paradigm for interpreting the baptismal immersion as entrance into the 'tomb' with Christ;
- (7) the introduction of a postbaptismal anointing associated with the gift and 'seal' of the Holy Spirit;



(8) the use of Easter week as a time for ‘mystagogical catechesis’ - an explanation of the sacramental ‘mysteries’ the newly initiated had experienced (Johnson 2015).

Johnson suggests that the development of a common framework for adult initiation was adopted by the church to preserve the integrity of the process, to enable its survival within the rapidly changing socio-cultural contexts. This sacramental framework had the purposeful intention of enforcing the seriousness of the Christian commitment,

as the rites themselves take on numerous elements, which heightened dramatically the experience of those being initiated, the overall intent was surely to impress upon them the seriousness of the step they were taking. (Johnson 1999: 202; see also Yarnold, 1972:59-66)

It is easy to offer an idealised and rose-tinted view of Christian conversion operating within the calmly ordered approach advocated by St Cyril, especially in view of the second major shift in Christianity which occurred from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards in northern and Western Europe. This is a period which was marked by mass or ‘power conversions’, made all the more dramatic by powerful and symbolic acts which took place publicly, in front of large crowds. Richard Fletcher asserts,

demonstrations of the power of the Christian God ... miracles, wonders, exorcisms, temple-torching and shrine smashing were in themselves acts of evangelisation that produced many conversions (Fletcher quoted in Kling 2014: 612)

The relative success of mass conversions and the practice of infant baptism, which gained popularity following St Augustine’s treatise of the doctrine of ‘original sin’, meant that the process of the catechumenate became significantly weakened. The integrity between the sacraments of initiation was lost as infant baptism was separated from Confirmation and Eucharist.

It was the Lateran Council in 1215 which caused further detachment from the initiation sequence by connecting the sacrament of Confession with Holy Communion under the stipulation the former must take place within the age of reason, as determined as around

7 years. This change in emphasis had the unfortunate consequence of further separating baptism from the Eucharist and led to a certain degree of neglect regarding the sacrament of Confirmation, which would continue for centuries to come. The unity and integrity of the early Christian baptismal formula had become lost as the symbolic significance associated with the various rites and rituals became compressed representing a diluted version of the 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian model of initiation.

### **3.7.6 Restoration & the RCIA**

Little change occurred to restore the original sequence of the sacraments of initiation until the Second Vatican Council and publication of the document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy 1963). The document prompted the publication of the Roman Rite of Christian Initiation – comprising the Rite of Baptism for Children 1969, the Rite of Confirmation in 1971 and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults or *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum* (OICA) in 1972 (Harmless 2014:22). As Keifer suggests, this represented a significant return to the practices of the early Church regarding the process of catechesis and formation for adults being initiated into the Catholic faith,

under the aegis of an ecumenical council, with the approval of the Roman see...the primary rights of initiation have been turned upside down and inside out, heralding a cry to begin a reform and renewal of the most radical sort. (Harmless 2014:22)

The Council returned to the practices of Christian antiquity for their catechetical inspiration because they saw an inherent wisdom in the original unitive process of Christian initiation. Balthasar Fischer, who chaired the committee responsible for drafting the baptism guidelines contends,

It was not our intention to keep ancient texts merely because they were old or for nostalgic reasons, but because these texts...still answered contemporary

needs...and treated Christian Initiation as what it really is, a process and [they] related this process to human needs. (2014:24)

The restoration of the adult catechumenate through the RCIA has been referred to as one of the most significant documents to emerge from the Second Vatican Council (RCIA Network 2020). After translation in 1974, widespread implementation was seen across Europe and the US. In 1987, the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales declared that the RCIA would become the mandatory pathway within which to initiate adults into the Catholicism.

The rite was characterised by a staged approach of steps, key rites and rituals which would take place within an ordered, gradual timeframe. Individuals embarking on the RCIA journey would begin their journey via the Period of Evangelisation and Pre-catechumenate and would be known as Inquirers,

The church is offering here an invitation to initial conversion. There is no obligation involved during this period. 'It is a time of evangelization: faithfully and constantly the living God is proclaimed and Jesus Christ who he has sent for the salvation of all.

(RCIA 36)

Having established a desire to know more and to continue their RCIA journey, inquirers will celebrate the rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens (RCIA, 41-47).

The new Catechumens will be assigned a sponsor, generally selected from the worshipping community, to accompany and guide them on their journey. The combined rite makes provision for baptised (Candidates) and unbaptised inquirers (Catechumens), and will take place amongst the worshipping community, as a way of publicly marking entrance to the second step – the Period of the Catechumenate (RCIA, 75-80). The RCIA stipulates this as a time for continuing to build community within the group, becoming more involved in parish activities and familiar with the parish

community, learning about the basic teachings and beliefs of the Catholic Church and exploring important and foundational Scripture passages. This period has a focus on fostering conversion, encouraging spiritual reflection on God's presence, and developing a solid prayer life. The second step is usually celebrated on the first Sunday of Lent and is known as the *Rite of Election or Enrolment of Names* for those who are unbaptised and the *Rite of Calling the Candidates to Continuing Conversion* for those who are baptised. This is usually held at the diocesan cathedral and carries a powerful symbolic message of individuals being called by name in the presence of family and friends, amid the entire diocesan community. The significance of cathedral worship has been expounded by excellent recent research by Bowman and Davie (Bowman 2019:312-3); their findings reinforce the sense of belonging and community which people find in visiting these large and impressive structures which often boast a strong sense of diversity and inclusion. Whilst Davie suggests that many will find their popularity surprising, she suggests that it is precisely their aesthetic and liturgical features which are compelling. She asserts the value of these features,

'the beauty of the cathedral building, traditional (or at least predictable) liturgy, excellence in preaching and world class music' (Davie quoted in Bowman 2019:302).

The next Period of Purification and Enlightenment (RCIA138-149) neatly coincides with Lent, characterised by a time of interior reflection, fasting and abstinence and a desire to encourage holiness and reject sinful tendencies and impulses. During this time, the Elect as they are then known, will participate in a number of presentations and scrutinies which enable preparation for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in advance of receiving the Sacraments of Initiation during the Easter Vigil Mass. The Neophytes are welcomed as full members of the worshipping Christian community and enter into the fourth and final period of the RCIA, the Mystagogy (the Interpretation of the Mystery).

This is an extremely important phase, in which Neophytes are given a period to reflect on the impact of their conversion in their personal lives and to reflect on their place in the worshipping community. The RCIA asserts that the period of mystagogy,

is a time for the community and the neophytes together to grow in deepening their grasp of the paschal mystery and in making it part of their lives through meditation on the Gospel, sharing in the eucharist, and doing the works of charity. (RCIA 244)

### **3.7.7 RCIA – variation and missed opportunities?**

In his research exploring the impact of RCIA on neophytes, Yamane found that new Catholics engaged more fully in the ecclesial community following their initiation and yet concludes that they were less likely to engage in a strong and consistent spiritual practice. Yamane contends that this is largely due to the emphasis placed on personal prayer by the RCIA programme, which meant that individuals may be very satisfied with their RCIA experience but not experience a substantive change in their spiritual practice (2012: 415).

In many ways Yamane highlights the variability which can exist between parishes delivering the RCIA and which ultimately affects the experience of the individual during their conversion experience and can strongly affect their future faith life. In terms of parish fidelity to the rite, McCallion and Maines refer to ‘text adherers’, ‘text adapters’ and ‘moderate text adherers’ (quoted in Yamane 2014:188). For Yamane however, he prefers to view the degree to which RCIA coordinators’ adhere to the RCIA in terms of a continuum, which inevitably means that the RCIA experience can vary widely from parish to parish, and person to person.

In recognition of this inevitable continuum, Schellman highlights the broad assumptions made about the life of a new Catholic in the community and the potential for new Catholics to become lost in the wider community. In particular, he notes that the final

period of Mystagogy, without doubt the briefest provision in the rite, is in fact the ‘weakest’ area of concentration for RCIA coordinators (Schellman 2010:1). A report commissioned by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops between 1997 and 2000, looking into the experience of adult initiation, concluded that whilst most neophytes were more than satisfied with their RCIA experience, the need for more adequate ‘aftercare’ was identified (Schellman 2010:1). The report found there to be an underlying assumption that neophytes were successfully embraced by the community and their ongoing spiritual development catered for within the parish context. However, Schellman asserts,

The real question, perhaps, is, ‘Where within our community do the neophytes find the continuing and ongoing adult faith formation that is their need and right as full members of the assembly?’ If regular adult formation is not already a deep commitment of the community, our newcomers have nowhere to go with the spiritual hungers we have helped them nurture and the skills at meditating on Gospel teaching we have helped them learn. This is clearly related to the ‘aftercare’ that the newly initiated expressed a strong desire for in the U.S. study. (2010:4).

Writing from the vantage point of the mid 80’s, Shaughnessy highlights an inadequacy in general understanding of the causal relationship between baptism and Christian discipleship (1985:57-76). In referring to the responsibility of the wider Christian community to initiating new members, Shaughnessy uses emotive terminology to present his case – terms such as ‘cavalier’, ‘near total abdication of responsibility’ and ‘apathy’ are used to describe the neglect which he feels has occurred towards adult initiation and most specifically to the implementation and delivery of the RCIA (1985:58). From a pastoral perspective, Shaughnessy suggests that much work is required to cast off the ‘old baggage’ of what he terms the ‘convert class’ approach,

the crass ‘sales pitch’ approach to the pool of prospects; the cerebral as distinct from the experiential method of catechesis; an inability or unwillingness to clearly distinguish between the baptised and un-baptised; the ‘end of the road’ concept of initiation that severely diminishes mystagogia or neglects it entirely (1985:72).

Shaughnessy recognises the profound significance in the first decision making phase of evangelisation and the pre-catechumenate and asserts that the RCIA must attempt to avoid the ‘herd’ approach when dealing with such a diverse range of factors, motivations and influences which bring people to faith. The fact that the majority of RCIA groups comprise both baptised and un-baptised individuals is a problem which Shaughnessy feels must be addressed with urgency,

There must be some way in which we can integrate them and at the same time honour the unmistakable fact that there is an essential difference between [them]. In many respects this difference requires that their different status be acknowledged and dealt with accordingly (1985:75).

### **3.8 Exploring the reasons why people convert**

The first section of this discussion has attempted to draw together much of the historical evidence from which we can assert a baseline definition of conceptual Christian conversion, along with the trajectories behind adult initiation rites and the broad establishment of the RCIA as the current working model of adult Christian formation in the Catholic Church. The direction of this review must now turn from the ‘how’ of Christian initiation to the ‘why?’.

St Paul’s conversion narrative presented at the beginning of this discussion, presents an important marker from which to consider the dominant forces and influences behind Christian conversion. Taken at its simplest level, Saul was a man for whom the entire course and journey of his life was transformed by God in a sudden and unexpected way and resulted in his wholehearted conversion to Christianity. However, upon deeper inspection the narrative is so much more powerful when the social and cultural conditions of first century Jerusalem are considered; Christianity was a new and radical movement which had caused shockwaves amongst the Jewish community. The teachings of Jesus Christ were in many ways diametrically opposed to the traditional

Jewish order, affecting the role of women, social responsibility for the poorest and weakest of society and new messages of hope and salvation which coincided with periods of socio-cultural unrest. Saul's status as an educated, Roman citizen would have made conversion to Christianity equally problematic. Historical exploration reveals the presence of several flashpoints, which provided a rich opportunity for new religious ideas to both flourish and become embedded within the traditional order.

Within the ongoing debate regarding the rate and process of secularisation, the decline of religious belief and practice and the future of Christianity, parallels are often drawn between the shrinking Christian communities of modern society and the early Christian communities. Whilst it is indeed true that both groups have been subject to marginalisation and face a future which runs counter to the prevailing culture, their socio-cultural landscapes were in fact very different. Such parallels give a sense of optimism and hope for the revival and growth of Christianity again in the West when compared with the nascent Christian communities whose expansion was rapid and geographically broad.

### **3.8.1 Factors affecting the rise of Christianity.**

In his work exploring the development of the early Christian communities, Nock asserts that establishing the context of the rapid and effective spread of Christianity through the Roman Empire provides an essential foundation to understanding conversion (Nock 1961). For NT scholars charting the sociological rise and development of first century Christian communities, there is a clear awareness of the dangers of reducing the catalyst for this success to socio-cultural factors alone. In his own work on the early origins and spread of Christianity, James Crossley is careful to assert the supreme importance of the person of Jesus Christ in theological terms and offers key guidance,



[to] reduce his role in history, not to mention that of Christian heroes such as Peter and Paul, to general nontheological socioeconomic 'forces' is bound to produce a negative reaction (Crossley 2006:16)

In his quest to explain how a once tiny movement originating in the margins of Jewish society managed to dislodge paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilisation, Crossley is equally careful to avoid a reductionist approach, 'I do not reduce the rise of Christianity to purely 'material' or social factors. Doctrine receives its due – an essential factor in the religion's success was what people believed' (2006:4)

That said, sociologists such as Berger and later, Bruce, would concur that whilst it is crude to imply that any particular religious system can be explained purely in terms of social processes, sociological reflection can reveal much about the historical, social and cultural context which provides a fertile soil and a hospitable environment in which religion can spread (Berger 1967:47; Bruce 2018:157).

Through his work as a sociologist and historian, Stark provides some quantifiable estimates regarding the often quoted but rarely substantiated reports relating to the rise of Christianity. Although few in the beginning, around the year 40 AD, the number of Christians grew so quickly that Emperor Constantine was himself converted, swept along by the rapidity of Christian growth (although interestingly not thought to be a causal factor in his own conversion). Stark estimates that in the year 40AD there were approximately 1,000 Christians and that this number increased slowly until around the year 100AD when numbers developed from 7,530 to 40,496 within the following fifty years. It wasn't until the latter half of the second century and early third century however when the most rapid phase of growth occurred, reaching 33,882,008, thus representing almost 56.5% of the population (Stark 1997:7).

First century Jerusalem presents several key developments which were sympathetic to the spread of monotheistic religions such as Christianity. Extensive transport systems were already in place which fostered communication and the rapid sharing of new ideas. The use of Greek as the common language was well established by this time and was adopted by New Testament writers, ensuring broader access to and understanding of Scripture and oral teaching. Stark proposes that the new religious movement spearheaded by St Paul represented a new reality, a new way of looking at the world and a new relationship with God. Since as Stark asserts, the religiously sceptical came from the more privileged sections of society, the appeal of Christianity was successful in transcending cultural lines and crossing the boundaries of class. If, as a newly emerging religious movement, Christianity had comprised a predominantly poor, agrarian community of followers, it is unlikely that it would have been tolerated by the state. As such, all religious fervour would have been extinguished quickly in order to guard against civil unrest (1997:31-33).

In reality, Christianity was taken up by a literate and educated audience, comprising a 'relatively small cluster of more or less intense groups, largely middle class in origin' (Stark 1997: 31). Traditional deprivation theory works from an underlying presumption that religion offers the most to the poorest in society, as a way of compensating for a lack of wealth, health and power. The new message of Christian held appeal not only for the poor and marginalised but the prestigious elite, for whom an assured afterlife was outside of their primary sphere of control. Christianity presented a solution to this tangible, existential need. Although not all scholars concur, Stark's model shows that when the provision of welfare is tied in with existing networks, it offers a relevant model for how cultural credibility can assist conversion.

The teachings of Christianity provided access points and pathways to fill existing gaps in society. Through the Christian values of equality and human dignity, Christianity was successful in elevating the position and role of women in society; in the Greco-Roman world, women were viewed as second-rate citizens and were rarely attributed positions of responsibility and authority in society. Women were afforded higher status not only in the family but were encouraged to take an active role in the spread of Christianity, particularly through the ministry of the diaconate or *diakonos* in Greek (Romans 16:1). Most importantly, as Stark substantiates, women were much more likely to convert to Christianity than men and so held a potential power of influence over husbands and male members of their households in terms of secondary conversions. Through widespread appeal to sections of society who had formally experienced exclusion and marginalisation, Christianity provided access and hope to people through a new worldview. In practical terms, this afforded Christianity a solid foundation for recruitment based on the establishment of strong social networks which had not existed previously. In this way, James Crossley suggests that the conversion of large numbers of people was related to people being 'structurally available' through a series of open social networks and pre-existing ties (Crossley 2006:143).

In addition to the establishment and rapid development of social networks, Christianity would prosper amid the unique socio-cultural conditions of the early Greco-Roman cities. Through a cumulative series of poor living conditions, Christianity would be provided with a fertile environment in which faith could thrive. Urban cities were relatively small but densely packed and cramped; in the ancient city of Antioch, where it is thought that the Gospel of Matthew was written, it is estimated that the population was approximately 75,000 people per square mile (contrasted with modern day London which has a population density of 4,542 people psm).

Poor quality tenements were rapidly constructed to cope with the pressure on inhabitants which frequently collapsed, entire families were forced to live in cramped spaces without fires or furnaces and as Stark concludes ‘when human density is high...urgent problems of sanitation arise’ (1997:152). Water supplies were untreated and limited and sanitation relied on chamber pots which were emptied directly into the streets. As Stambaugh describes, ‘Mud, open sewers, manure, and crowds. In fact human corpses – adult as well as infant – were sometimes just pushed into the street and abandoned’ (quoted in Stark 1997:154) This description paints a vivid picture of misery and social crisis and suggests a prevailing sense of despair which inevitably would have been experienced by the majority of people. It is therefore unsurprising that the new Christian promises of hope and salvation communicated to people whose lives were constantly in peril and threat of imminent death, would have offered a sense of relief, through Christian teaching which at its core, assigned profound meaning to their individual and collective suffering. As McNeil contends, ‘Christianity was...a system of thought and feeling thoroughly adapted to a time of troubles in which hardship, disease, and violent death commonly prevailed’ (quoted in Stark 1997:80).

The physical influence of Christian belief was impactful, especially when compounded by the crisis of two epidemics which decimated the populations of the Roman Empire. Thought to be the earliest strain of the smallpox virus, in 165AD the disease was lethal and over a 15year period, wiped out up to a third of the empire’s population. Later in 251, measles swept through both the cities and the rural areas, to devastating effect. A letter from Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, specifically references the central Christian values of love and charity, which were translated into service and community solidarity (Stark 1997:74). The sense of social responsibility meant that in the face of disaster, Christians were better able to cope with potential disaster, to care for anyone

who was ill and in need, particularly the pagans who were often deserted by their family and friends for fear of catching the disease. The depth of relationships which then developed between the sick and those caring for them was cultivated and nourished through the selfless acts of Christians and ultimately led to a substantial number of conversions. Through the context of social crisis, Christianity was able to triumph through a process of 'revitalisation' and this demonstrates the vital importance of socio-cultural context and religious growth (Stark 1997:75).

### **3.8.2 Attachment theory and social networks**

The discussion so far has found that people can encounter faith through a variety of means and can provide tangible solutions to problems they encounter in their lives. In antiquity, Christianity signified care and treatment in the face of illness, hope of salvation and strength to endure physical hardship and ongoing fear of death. In their research exploring the spread of religious movements, Stark and Lofland discovered that people were motivated less by the acceptance of a new ideology in the first instance and more through the strength of interpersonal attachments with others.

Attachment theory asserts that religious conversion takes place when the attachments formed with members within the new religious group outweigh or over-balance those of non-members (Lofland and Stark 1965:862-875; Lofland & Skonovd 1981: 385).

When attachment is established through strong social bonds, people are much more likely to commit to a new way of thinking and behaving which is at odds with the majority view and as such, considered to be 'deviant'. The control theory of deviant behaviour as emphasised by Stark et al, found that people desired to conform to the expectations and behaviour of their new group, based on the realisation that they would lose more from the exposure of their new 'deviant' behaviour, than would be the case from the new religious practice itself (1965:865). For people living in the first century,

becoming Christian would have been seen as a major act of deviance, however as Christians were beginning to outnumber the pagans in the aftermath of the epidemic, their presence as a group was gaining dominance. People had much to gain in terms of social welfare, gender equality and existential hope in the face of urban misery and social crisis.

It is perhaps significant at this stage to consider that in the area of evangelisation, the formation of a strong communal element is recognisable in the conversion pathways for Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Christian adult initiation as part of the RCIA, should ideally take place within a group rather than one-to-one formation and will encourage the development of smaller, cell groups after initiation. The Alpha Course, an Anglican initiative has a strong and prescriptive insistence on the formation of large groups of individuals considering faith (Gumbel 2021). Often numbering sixty people or more at times, at the end of the ten-week course, the formation of home church groups is strongly encouraged to continue the faith journey and to transmit their faith to others. The centrality of social networks and personal attachment to foster plausibility and to nourish conversion cannot be underestimated. Stark and Finke suggest that social networks bring an air of plausibility to new religious beliefs and register this as a more or less constant feature of societies within different historical contexts (2000:117). There is contention regarding this perspective; Hock contends that on the contrary, each period has a profile and character which is distinctive and unique,

Ancient cities are not modern ones and ancient networks that were centred in aristocratic households included more than family and friends: domestic slaves, freedmen and perhaps parasites, teachers, athletic trainers and travellers. In addition, urban life was lived more in public, so that recruitment could proceed along more extensive and complex networks than we find... in our more nuclear and anonymous cities and suburbs (quoted in Stark 1997:21).

Everton's study of social networks and their role in contemporary religious conversion found that social ties played a significant role in sparking religious enquiry and in helping to fan the flames of spiritual enquiry (2018:94). He reinforces Stark and Bainbridge's finding with adolescent adults who displayed a natural predisposition to '[bring their] religious behaviour into alignment with that of [their] friends and family' (Stark & Bainbridge 1980:389; Stark 1996:17; see also Everton 2018:94). Everton does however highlight the critique that social network theory has a deterministic effect, thereby de-emphasising the significance of individual choice and autonomy with the implication that networks carry greater weight on the individual than they perceive. (Smilde 2005:768; see also Everton 2018:96).

### **3.8.3 Predispositional and situational factors - 'between the impulse and the act falls the shadow' (T. S. Eliot)**

In 1965, Lofland and Stark decided to explore the development and mechanics which had determined the widespread recruitment of followers to The Unification Church or 'The Moonies', a new religious movement founded by Mr Chang in Korea and then made its way to the United States. Their findings were significant and massively influential in exploring the sociological drivers and motivating factors which could explain why people chose to join new religious groups and as such, their work would become known as 'the most important empirical study of conversion' (Rambo quoted in Crossley 2006:143)

Mr Chang, also known as 'Lord of the Second Advent', claimed that he had experienced a revelation of 'Divine Precepts' which would enable him to re-build the Garden of Eden conditions to the existing world by 1967. He was responsible for recruiting more than 5,000 followers to his new religious movement in Korea, one of whom was a Methodist minister, Miss Yoon-Sook Lee who then brought the message to

the United States. Through direct observations of this West Coast New Religious Movement (NRM), Lofland and Stark set out to investigate the conditions under which conversion occurs and would later develop a 'value added' model comprising seven factors which explain individual and collective conformity to a completely new ideological system of beliefs and practices (Lofland & Stark 1965:862-865).

Having gathered data from 21 converts, Lofland and Stark asserted that even before the conditions of their model came into play, there were two dominant forces which appeared to lay certain foundations upon which religious change could occur. Their respondents appeared to demonstrate certain characteristics which predisposed them to accept the new idea or world view and these included significant life experiences, both negative and positive such as losing a job, new relationships or financial or personal instability. Lofland and Stark concurred that quantitative demographic data had been relied upon too heavily as an identifier of prevailing forces in people's lives and that a more qualitative approach was required. Secondly, the authors identified that there was an important point between the initial spark of interest and commitment, to which TS Eliot refers 'between the impulse and the act falls the shadow', which was affected by certain situational elements, which nourish and enable the new idea to take root. As discussed previously, Lofland and Stark could clearly evidence the importance of affectional bonds and inter-personal relationships with others as being influential in helping people adapt their lives to new beliefs and practices.

Lofland & Stark's new 'value-added' model proposed a class of seven, general conditions which, they asserted, made conversion most likely. They used the imagery of a funnel to represent the conditions, which they asserted would successively accumulate before finally reaching the eventual point of conversion. The conditions begin with (1) tension and encompass all types of frustration, strain or deprivation



which make the individual dissatisfied to an extent that they begin to adopt a (2) problem-solving mindset. With this perspective, the individual seems more willing to accept solutions from all realms of life, physical and the supernatural and displays a degree of receptivity towards religious meaning within the context of their life. Emboldened with this new receptivity to differing ideas, the individual may then adopt the role of (3) Seekership in which they would hop between different religious groups as a way of finding the solution to their problem. With timing being an important component in the next step, with the right social support and cultivated bonds, the individual will reach a key (4) turning point in which they are provided with the means and opportunity to move forward and decision making becomes concretised as it moves from mere abstraction. With an increasingly developed and established social network, the individual comes to final acceptance of the view-point of their new social group, in what the authors call the (5) cult-affective bond. Final and total conversion occurs at the final stage of (6) intensive interaction, defined by Lofland and Stark as the point at which an individual becomes a 'deployable agent', capable of converting others. There is an implied suggestion of close proximity with members of the new group, which helps to sustain the new belief and practice, a process which could take up to a year or more (Lofland & Stark 1965:862-875).

Lofland and Stark's research represented a foundational shift in understanding conversion as volitional choice within the individual search for meaning, whilst focusing on the forces which could 'push' a person to make a particular religious choice (Richardson 1985:168). These results are strengthened by extensive research conducted by Eileen Barker into the Unification Church (UC) and her exploration of the factors which could attract individuals to conform to a notorious religious cult such as the Moonies. Her research set out to explore the reasons why people routinely regarded the

Moonies as having something better to offer them than the ‘outside society’ (1984; 233). In an attempt to dispel widespread assumptions that recruitment occurred through coercion or ‘brainwashing’, Barker asserts that this is an overly simplistic approach which fails to capture the narratives and life experiences pertinent to each individual. Barker identifies several approaches adopted by The Moonies which point strongly towards attachment theory. Such attempts included persuading people to attend residential courses which would initially provide access to large networks of like-minded followers, whilst providing opportunities to convey intense experiences of a loving, caring and all-embracing community. Through her research she found this approach would successfully,

foster feelings of personal involvement with individuals, which then developed into feelings of trust and commitment and loyalty to the group – feelings which may encourage the guest to accept, more readily than he would otherwise, the world from a Unification perspective (1984:233)

Significantly, Barker questions whether there are unique characteristics of modern society which may have presented the requisite ‘push’ towards recruitment. The Unification church offered people a religious goal, an opportunity to achieve a new world, with absolute values given towards perfection and truth and automatic membership into an ‘ideal family’ – one which promised close relationships with each other and with God and a harmonious lifestyle. The UC also provided the means by which these ultimate goals could be achieved. In accordance with Lofland and Stark’s research, the UC offered a new ideological worldview and the requisite social networks, and inter-personal relationships to provide coherent structure for the way forward. In the face of a fragmented society seen by many as turbulent, violent, chaotic and unjust, the UC presented a cohesive body of teachings and practice which were carefully directed, structured and controlled and which offered a ‘higher’ ideal than the

materialism of modern society...a religious ideal' (1984:238). Barker concludes that in many ways, recruitment to the Unification Church was based on a carefully evaluated assessment of potential gains and rewards for individuals and in this sense conforms to rational choice theory as outlined by Gartrell and Shannon, which views 'recruits to religious movements acting as if they weigh rewards and sanctions from affiliation with members and non-members in addition to weighing the attractiveness of movements' beliefs and ideas.' (1985:37; see also Gooren 2007:341)

#### **3.8.4 Typologies and conversion motifs**

In the early eighties, Lofland and Skonovd developed the original research a stage further by asserting that the traditionally understood typologies of conversion had changed over time, in response to different social, historical and cultural contexts. They proposed six conversion motifs which they suggest have varying degrees of fluidity depending on the context of the time; they comprise the Intellectual, Mystical, Experimental, Affectional, Revivalist and Coercive (see Fig. 12). For each of the motifs, Lofland and Skonovd propose five key variations which operate between each motif: social pressure, temporal duration, affective arousal, affective content, belief participation sequence (1981:375-380).

### Lofland & Skonovd's Conversion motifs

	Conversion Motifs					
Major Variations	Intellectual	Mystical	Experimental	Affectional	Revivalist	Coercive
Degree of social pressure	Low or none	None or little	Low	Medium	High	High
Temporal Duration	Medium	Short	Long	Long	Short	Long
Level of Affective Arousal	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	High
Affective content	Illumination	Awe, love, fear	Curiosity	Affection	Love (&fear)	Fear (&love)
Belief/ -Participation sequence	Belief-participation	Belief-participation	Participation-belief	Participation-belief	Participation-belief	Participation-belief

*Figure 1: Lofland & Skonovd's Conversion motifs*

The Intellectual motif is interestingly described by the authors as ‘yet relatively uncommon’ and at the time of their writing in 1981, a ‘new mode of entry’ (1981:376).

The Intellectual motif is related to self-directed study, relying on little outside contact and assuming the more ‘active’ model of conversion (Lofland and Skonovd 1981:376, Richardson 1985:167). The individual may experience some affective arousal, in relation to emotional illumination and the temporal journey may take months or years before making formal contact to continue their journey. In this motif, belief occurs before participation. Whilst this was a relatively uncommon motif for the authors, this is perhaps the most interesting to consider for a contemporary, pluralist culture in which faith has become increasingly privatised and the concept of community diminished. In a recent YouTube video by Bishop Robert Barron, entitled ‘Googling God’ it was interesting to read the following viewer comment,

I thought this was supposed to be about the fact that many people are living a Christian life on the Net. Like me. I found [my way] back to my Christian roots

not long ago, but I have not taken the step into a full church life...I'm an online Christian (Bishop Barron 2019)

The second motif is the Mystical model as described earlier, with the prototypical example of St Paul on the road to Damascus (1981: 377). The affective level of feeling and emotion is high, and often the temporal duration of this divine experience will be short or instantaneous. The convert will often be alone in their experience and therefore considerations of social pressure are low. Lofland and Skonovd note that instances of mystical conversion appeared more popular in the early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced by William James, whilst academic interest has waned in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and focuses on such accounts in the interests of psychoanalysis.

The third Experimental motif is most closely aligned with Bromley and Shupe's role theory model in which individuals are encouraged to try out the religious behaviour before formal commitment or assent is given (1981:378). In this way the individual experiences the new pattern of behaviour and in doing so, in close proximity to other followers or adherents, evaluates the new choice in terms of familiarity with the characteristics of those around them (Bruce 2014:16) Under this motif, affective arousal is largely guided by curiosity over the new religious movement and can take a prolonged period of time before the individual decides to commit themselves fully. Lofland and Skonovd recognise James Beckford's work with the Jehovah's Witness community in which he identifies four characteristics to determine the course of religious conversion. The followers claim to have experienced a progression of mental states (1) which are largely 'cognitive' (2), their conversion is viewed as something which has been achieved (3) and (4) finally they are assigned an experienced elder in their final stage as a neophyte or new adherent (Beckford 1987:253-7, Lofland and Skonovd 1981:378)

The fourth Affectional motif has already been alluded to in previous sections of the review exploring the growth of religion as a consequence of inter-personal attachments and affective social bonds. The authors append their earlier findings from 1965, in which they refer to the original phrase of ‘coming to the opinion of one’s friends’ to prefer the phrase coined by Stark and Bainbridge which states, ‘interpersonal bonds are the fundamental support for recruitment’ (1980:389). Whilst affective arousal and temporal duration can be prolonged within this motif, belief will tend to follow participation and the authors conclude that affectional ties are without doubt one of the central elements for religious change.

The authors are less convinced about the suitability of the fifth Revivalist motif. They suggest that since World War II, revivalist movements have been revealed to have a minor and temporary effect on individuals and in many cases, dramatic conversions have been staged (1981:380). They do recognise currents of revivalist trends which have taken place over time and cite the Unification Church as one example and which has been mentioned previously in the discussion.

The final Coercive motif relates to brainwashing as a strategy to force individuals to join a religious cult, sect or movement (1981: 381). The authors suggest that for brainwashing to have taken place, two conditions must be met – first, the individual must display some form of compulsion and secondly, they must prove a degree of sincerity in their admissions of guilt or to embrace the new ideological belief system. Brainwashing was used in the twentieth century by European communists and Chinese Communists and of course, the UC was explored by Eileen Barker to investigate the likelihood of coercive tactics to recruit members but found this not to be the case.

The authors helpfully consider the implications for their conversion motif model and stress the high probability for variation and deviation in occurrence and emphasis for certain motifs, suggesting the already perceived increase in instances of intellectual and experimental conversions and a decline in the Revivalist and Mystical strands within modern society (1985:173). As discussed previously, Lofland and Skonovd advocate future research into the conversion motifs in recognition that the categories have the potential to shift in relation to unique historical periods and societies and even between different sub-groups within the same society.

### **3.8.5 Ritual and rites in modern culture**

There is broad consensus that the study of initiation rites can tell us very much more than the process itself and can instead provide a window into the broader religious landscape (Yamane 2014:91; Shaughnessy 1985:58). Shaughnessy suggests that rituals provide a helpful cultural signpost,

Anthropologists tell us that great insights can be gained into the life of a people, tribe, or nation by the way they initiate their neophytes and bury their dead. A most casual appraisal using this criterion should tell us that as Christians we are in deep trouble (1985:58)

Whilst it may be the case that from an institution's perspective, rituals help to create and sustain loyalty within a group, Rambo contends that on the part of the individual, rituals are a powerful tool of learning (1993:127). In Christian baptism, the individual casts off their own life, to replace with the new; the symbolic use of the cross, white garment, oil, water and light all serve to reinforce the rejection of the old life and to embed the new behaviours and practices in to the individuals' life from that moment onwards. Rituals also serve an important public function in their role as 'bridge-burning events', providing a climax moment which concludes an often-protracted process of intense preparation and formation (Hine in Rambo 1993:128). Hine believes that rituals are

effective in three major ways, first, the fact that rituals take place within the public community helps to consolidate the individual's new life and strengthens their self-image. For those observing, they are reminded of their own religious commitment through the dramatic performance of the ritual act. Significantly, Rambo suggests that the public observation of rituals can have a performative function and have often been responsible for mass conversions. An example of this effect took place in Western India in 1956, when thousands of people in Maharashtra gave up their Hindu faith to become Buddhist. Hine suggests that to outsiders, the performance of rituals can often be perceived as highly unusual or even 'absurd' events; she maintains that even this reaction helps to reinforce boundaries between the individual and those outside the community (Rambo 1993:129).

David Yamane emphasises the significance of the RCIA as the liturgical mechanism to reintroduce the rites of initiation to a modern culture, for whom such rites of passage have fragmented over time. Grimes contends that rites and rituals have a deeply connective function for individuals who may be subject to a culture in which faith is becoming increasingly privatised,

Without rites that engage our imaginations, communities, and bodies, we lose touch with rhythms of the human life course, just as we become temporally disorientated without seasonal and commemorative rites that recreate our connections to the natural world and the course of human history (Grimes 2002:3)

Although Grimes is the first to acknowledge that in contemporary culture there are 'few authentic and compelling rites', Yamane suggests that the RCIA presents a valuable opportunity for people to mark their spiritual transition through its carefully reconstructed framework. Yamane's research resonates with much of the literature exploring the shifts in conversion paradigms over time which have challenged the traditional, passive understanding of conversion (Acts 9:1-19, NRSV). He reveals new



understandings which move towards a more active, meaning-seeking role in which the individual exercises volition in choosing to follow the new religious path. Yamane found that individuals who make intentional choices regarding religion tend to treasure and protect their new identities vehemently, perhaps more so than for people with an ascribed or inherited faith (2014:3).

Through his research, Yamane uncovers the profound significance of the process of initiation for modern individuals, the depth and importance of rites of passage and of tradition. This finding perhaps makes a broader statement about the implicit assumptions made about the needs of modern individuals living in a culture which has a fractured relationship with religion in the public sphere. He maintains ‘Simply equating modernity with an inexorable ‘detraditionalization’ is overwrought and underappreciative of just how traditioned modern people, Catholics included, truly are’ (2014:19).

### **3.8.6 Identity formation**

Engelke suggests that a mid-twentieth century shift in understanding identity has taken place in direct relationship to the process of globalisation. He defines this term as

an intensely inter-connected world – one where the rapid flows of capital, people, goods, images and ideologies draw more and more of the globe into webs of interconnection, compressing our sense of time and space and making the world feel smaller and distances shorter (Engelke 2017:185).

Engelke suggests that the OED definition of identity as, ‘the quality or condition of being the same in substance’ is somewhat loose. Over the past 50 to 60 years, most specifically to speak of identity is to define the self in relation to groups and to ‘circumstance, perspective and location’ (2017:181-187).

Engelke suggests that it is within this context that the issue of identity is being forced – by presenting diversity and difference, groups and individuals must forge new pathways to find what connects us and to shape a strong cultural identity. This is particularly the case when cultural boundaries become blurred and the threat of homogeneity is perceived; in the face of such threat, he suggests that old traditions are revitalised or in some cases, reinvented altogether to perform this important cultural function – to reassert and protect cultural identity. Carving a distinctive space with clear boundaries of who is inside and who is outside the group is an important factor explaining why some religious communities decline and others fail within a pluralist culture. Their strength lies in the establishment of a strong collective identity, which as Smith asserts helps people find meaning and a sense of belonging ‘within social groups (or subcultures) that sustain distinctive, morally orientating collective identities’ (Smith et al. 1998:90).

### **3.8.7 Belief and the search for meaning**

First-hand accounts of St Paul’s conversion give expression to the concept of conversion narrative, the idea that individuals interpret and derive meaning from profound religious experience through the vehicle of story or narrative (Galatians 1:13–14). The way in which people interpret events which occur in their lives and knit them together to form a coherent narrative provide key insights into the search for meaning and is often embedded in the individual search for faith. There is consensus regarding the overemphasis in academia for measuring the quantitative data pointing to widespread religious decline rather than refocusing the spotlight on the role of belief in modern culture. Abby Day suggests that sociologists display a ‘near-obsession’ with the process of secularisation and in measuring affiliation, behaviour and practice but remain silent on the subject of individual beliefs (2013:4).

Edward Burnett Tylor was heavily influential in the field of evolutionary social science for his reading of belief as a largely individualistic process of explaining ‘uncanny’ events in life and which helped to create a meaningful narrative for people. The understanding of religion as a meaning-making tool was further expounded by Max Weber, who determined that people are promoted to find meaningful explanations in the face of unfortunate or ‘bad’ events,

the metaphysical needs of the human mind as it is driven to reflect on ethical and religious questions, driven not by material need but by an inner compulsion to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and to take up a position toward it (1965:117).

In his work as a cultural anthropologist, Geertz embraced Weber’s interpretation of the role of belief in the construction of meaning (for many but not all people) and developed this theory in relation to ritual. He suggests that the inherent impulse which he terms the ‘religious perspective’, can be lived out through the experience of incorporating acts which utilise ideas, rituals or values which have been reproduced rather than evoked through performance. Geertz has exerted significant influence in the areas of identity formation and belief and is widely respected amongst scholars of sociology and anthropology. As Day asserts, ‘Geertz plots a new course for anthropologists, where belief as an idea gives way to belief as a practice, with ritual symbolising meaning’ (Geertz quoted in Day 2013:14).

Berger further maintains the inherency of religion as a uniquely human characteristic, existing as a ‘human craving for meaning that appears to have the force of instinct. Men are congenitally compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality (sic)’ (1967:22). In her research on the content, formation and role of belief in modern culture and its implications for religious identity, Abby Day suggests that belief does not seem to be inherent and pre-formed but is akin to the residence of emotion in the

individual and is instead developed relationally. Day suggests that people are ‘longing for belonging’ and for the most part, want to believe in value systems, people and social institutions in which they can place their trust (2013:193). Day presents her theory of performative belief which is generated through lived performance and carried out through social action, where the object of worship is not God but belonging. By placing belief in the social realm, Day finds that identity formation comes about through social systems and interactions (2013:194). Smith concurs that in fact belonging to religious sub-cultural groups assists people to find meaning through the collective identities that they offer. He asserts, ‘Put simply, our identities are not formed in isolation from other human beings but through interaction with them’ (quoted in Everton, 2018:37)

### **3.8.8 Stages of faith.**

Fowler’s research emphasises the transitional nature of the development of faith, with particular focus on adult faith development and human becoming. He explores this in the light of his research which sought to understand the individual search for meaning, particularly in light of secularisation and the response of faith at different life stages (1984).

Fowler concurs with the Weberian school which sees faith as an inherent, universal characteristic of humanity (1965:117). The human search for meaning is prompted by the shared experiences of life, moments of joy, sadness and uncertainty which unify and unite and the moments of existential questioning which lead individuals to search for transcendence. Fowler contends that these shared human experiences are social and relational and in line with Day’s findings, belief is anchored in relationship and attachment to others,

In the midst of contingency....we spend our blessed and threatened years becoming selves through relations of trust and loyalty with others like us –

persons and communities... We are language-related, symbol-borne and story-sustaining creatures (1984:51).

Fowler contends that the process of secularisation and the emergence of pluralism has caused the breakdown of communal and cultural narratives of meaning. In his research conducting qualitative, semi-clinical interviews with over 500 people, Fowler and his team sought to discover whether there were developmental patterns which could inform two areas of exploration: first, how people awaken to belief and commitment to the extent that their lives are changed and secondly, to identify the stages people go through in making meaning. Fowler is careful to establish that his research is not concerned with the contents of faith but moreover the uniform stages or ways of being in faith. The transitions between the stages are not to be perceived in terms of climbing stairs or ascending a ladder, in terms of a 'higher', 'lower' mindset but instead reports that the transitional movement between key stages is suggestive of a more nuanced cumulation of factors, 'the real issue has to do with a successive progression of more complex, differentiated, and comprehensive modes of knowing and valuing' (Fowler 1984:57)

Fowler's research identified seven stages of faith beginning with Primal Faith which lays the primitive foundations of dependent faith from birth until the age of two, when the Intuitive-Projective Faith begins and coincides with the development of language and close communication with the primary care-giver and synthesis occurs with perception, feelings and imaginative fantasy. The Mythic-Literal Faith occurs around the age of seven when the child is beginning to demonstrate 'concrete operational thinking' and faith is communicated through story, rules and shared value systems within the family unit and close community. Early adolescence marks the next stage of Synthetic-Conventional Faith and typically accounts for a flourishing new sense of 'self-consciousness', awareness and interiority. The Synthetic stage is characterised as

the time when the young adult pulls together all their experiences and perceptions in the crucial, early phases of identity formation and emerging self-hood. In this stage, faith is embedded and part of the emerging identity in the world through the composition of the individual's life story and the search for meaning. It is at this point that the stages of faith transition have particular relevance for the spark points of spiritual awakening for adults exploring religious conversion. Transition to the Individuative-Reflective faith sees the individual beginning to explore, examine and critically analyse the defining elements of their faith and identity. It is at this stage that formal adult initiation, through the RCIA and similar programmes, play a crucial role in helping people to critically explore the impact of faith in their lives. In effect, individuals in this stage will experience a sense of what Fowler terms 'self-authorisation' in which they examine the value systems and roles that they have embraced until this point objectively, with a new sense of assuming explicit commitment and accountability for their faith. (1984:62).

Once an individual assumes responsibility for and a confidence in their decisions regarding the adoption or pursuit of faith, Fowler determines that movement between the subsequent stages can take on an organic or natural transition. He suggests in particular that the entrance to mid-life may in fact provide certain factors or conditions which encourage a certain interior reflection that enables faith to develop,

One probably feels the full weight of being a member of the 'bridge' generation, the linking group between the elders, who are gradually passing off the scene, and the youth, who are just beginning to seek and find their entering points in being the generation of the future (1984:65).

The next phase of Conjunctive faith is therefore characterised by a 'second naivete' or 'postcritical receptivity' in which people display a new openness or receptivity to different traditions and communities, a desire to participate in symbol and myth as a

way of exploring reality and a readiness to embrace deep and active commitment. The final stage of Universalising faith is characterised through an extended circle of care and influence beyond simply one's close family and friends to the community at large and secondly involves a detachment or disinterest for the self which has as its focus the complete and total love of God.

The findings of Fowler's research imply that there are seven distinct phases which characterise the progression of faith and its development life cycle, beginning with Primal faith and ending with Universalising faith – a spiritual stage which Fowler's critics recognise is achieved by a relatively small number of individuals. Nevertheless, the recognisable patterns of spiritual awareness or awakening and of behaviour and practice, indicate distinctive steps and periods of transition which can be anticipated and to some degree, predicted. Rambo suggests that using developmental stages through which to view conversion, as through a lens, can be helpful to evaluate consequential effect on the individual and so to determine whether they have 'progressed, regressed or remained the same' (1983:157). Whilst Fowler's seven stages of development were restricted in this research to adult development phases, using Rambo's framework, it was possible to detect key themes highlighted by Fowler in regard to the objective re-assessment of faith by people, who were clearly in a process of transition through mid-life. The qualitative data reflected that for many people, during these life stages, sequences of events caused a deeper interior reflection to occur, which led to the adoption of a new receptivity to faith.

### **3.8.9 Thresholds of faith**

During the mid-90's, a campus minister at UCLA noticed that evangelistic outreach was failing to communicate the teachings of Christianity to its students as it had done successfully in the past. In response to 37 students undergoing some form of

conversion experience during the academic year 1997-98, the ministry team decided to investigate their experiences. It was found that an overwhelming number of the accounts displayed a pattern of movement through five thresholds of conversion. Not all students experienced the threshold at the same time and in all cases, conversion required an intentional choice to pursue Christianity and a spiritual energy to provide the momentum for growth and transformation (Weddell 2012:127).

The five thresholds begin with the establishment of trust and a positive association with the person of Jesus in some way, this could be through the Church or another believer but Weddell is keen to highlight that this first stage of trust building is crucial before progress can be made towards active faith (2012:128). The next threshold is characterised through spiritual curiosity and the desire to find out more about the teachings of Christianity and the person of Jesus. The phase of curiosity is still far removed from active faith but represents more than passive trust. This stage gives way to spiritual openness, in which a person declares to themselves and to God their own readiness for personal and spiritual change. Weddell highlights that even though the person may exhibit a degree of openness, there is still a way to go before commitment occurs. Spiritual seeking is the fourth threshold which moves the person from a passive to active pursuit of faith and an urgent desire to know more, to determine whether they are able to fully commit themselves to Christ. The final phase is one of intentional discipleship in which the seekership phase ends and the decision is made to 'drop one's nets' and follow Christ and symbolises total commitment.

The discussion so far has explored the findings of research exploring the various phases a person might experience when they experience a deepening of faith and of their belief systems whether previously held or not. For Fowler, his seven stages of faith development are closely tied to age and life stage transitions, whilst for Weddell, since



all the research participants were young students, the thresholds related to specific spiritual stages which could become opportunities or fertile ground within which faith could develop and which displayed strong socially patterned relationships and networks with key individuals. The researchers discovered a high degree of openness and receptivity to faith amongst the respondents and through which the various bridges could be built to transition to the next phases. Weddell interprets and evaluates these findings in a pastoral and applicable way to the process of evangelisation, extrapolating the thresholds to provide for the spectrum of belief which now exists in contemporary secular culture.

### **3.8.10 Understanding conversion as process**

Rambo proposes a seven-stage model in which he explores the process of religious change based on the following three assumptions, a) that conversion is a process, rather than a single event b) that conversion is contextual and must be considered in the light of relationships, processes and ideologies, which he maintains provide the 'matrix' for religious change c) factors involved in the conversion process are multiple, interactive and cumulative. Rambo asserts that there is no one cause of conversion but instead involves, 'a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations and experiences' (Rambo 1989: 48).

The first and most significant stage in relation to this research is Context, and whilst of primary importance, Rambo is keen to highlight that Context affects every stage of the conversion process, it does not have a linear or temporal association and instead pervades each of the subsequent stages travelling in both directions. Rambo differentiates between macros context which describes the wider socio-cultural landscape and micro-contexts comprising an individual's home, family and personal circumstances. As previously discussed, he describes a range of contextual influences

such as the types of religious conversion such as 'Tradition transition', 'Institutional transition', 'Affiliation', 'Intensification' and 'Apostasy' and devotes time and space to consideration of Lofland and Skonovd's conversion motifs as important pre-dispositional factors (1993:13,14). Once the Context has been explored and established, Rambo moves to the second stage of crisis in which he explores the nature of the experience in terms of its defining characteristics of intensity, duration, whether they are internally or externally sourced and then proposes specific catalyst experiences most closely associated with conversion experiences such as illness and healing, mystical experiences and near-death experiences as well as the existential question 'Is this all there is?'. Once the crisis is recognised and embedded, the individual is moved to respond as a way of re-establishing equilibrium, bringing certainty and consistency back. In moments of crisis, the need to restore order becomes compelling, 'people actively look for resources that offer growth and development to 'fill the void', 'solve the problem, or enrich life' (Rambo 1989:56).

The response for each person can arise from certain inherent personal traits or characteristics, what Rambo describes as structural availability. Structural availability relates to a person's intellectual, religious, emotional pathways or motivational drive such as the desire for pleasure over pain and need for power or transcendence, as ways to enhance self-esteem. Encounter is the fourth stage which describes the moment the individual takes their first steps to find out more and will often involve a physical visit to the church or place of worship to meet the individual who will assist with the first tentative steps toward faith.

Key influencing factors at this stage will involve the style of the advocate and their understanding of the conversion process within the specific tradition, in addition to preliminary inducements and benefits which will almost immediately appear as

solutions to the pre-existing crisis, such as the presentation of concrete and clear systems of meaning, guidance and teachings on living, leadership and power. The quality of the relationship which develops between the advocate and the seeker will influence the (1) transition to the next stage of interaction, the (2) complex interplay between the adoption of new roles and expectations, the (3) establishment of different types of relationships with others, the self and God and finally (4) physical interaction in the forms of rituals through which Rambo cites Victor Turner's work exploring the choreography of the soul (Turner 1969:121; see also Rambo 2014:378).

The fifth stage of Commitment is characterised through formative decision-making rituals and engagement in testimony, which cements the original desire for meaning and certainty by reconstructing the faith narrative in the light of the individual and their placement within the community story. For the purposes of this research, exploration of the consequences of the conversion experiences are particularly relevant in terms of the longitudinal interviews conducted after one year of conversion. It will be of specific relevance to explore the narratives of the conversion experiences and as Rambo has elucidated, to explore this area in the light of progression, regression or stasis. (Rambo 1989:169)

### **3.9 Conclusion: Literature review**

The aim of this chapter was to present a review of key literature to enable a cogent evaluation of Christian conversion which would attempt to explore some key areas in relation to contemporary British culture, whilst providing the framework for both working with and illuminating the findings of this research. Conversion study research has fluctuated greatly since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often in response to large scale global change and has witnessed a decline over the last thirty years. Small wellsprings of academic interest in conversion research have begun to emerge in recent years and

appear to reflect a growing need for exploration of conversion in relation to contemporary culture, which is highly contextual and thematic. This review has found overwhelming agreement that the factors involved in conversion are responsive to the social, cultural, political and economic landscape of the prevailing culture at a macro level and a plethora of diverse motivations and influencing factors at the ‘micro’ level of individual experience. All of these are rightly positioned under the umbrella of God’s dynamic action in the lives of individuals and within the culture at large, within the macro and the micro and everything in between.

The review began by asking if it is possible to provide a baseline definition and measure for Christian conversion and in exploring this area, comparatively analysed the conversion pathways from the Jewish and Islamic traditions. Christian initiation shares parallels with Jewish initiation practice in adopting a lengthy process of formation, catechesis and self-reflection as a means of preparing an individual for conversion and incorporates the use of ritual as a means to embed and incorporate the new religious behaviour in the midst of the community. As part of the process of catechesis, Christian initiation parallels Judaism and Islam in their placement of religious identity at the heart of the conversion journey. The review explored the historical lineage which now informs the structure, content and delivery of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, albeit identifying the diversity and disparity which can present in the implementation of the RCIA across varying pastoral contexts. The discussion reflects a call for greater support to be given to new Catholics following conversion, both as a way of strengthening their new religious identity but also in the completion of the conversion arc in creating what Sherry Weddell terms ‘intentional disciples’.

Having established what modern Catholic conversion looks like in contemporary culture, the review moved to explore the reasons why individuals would make a

religious choice which runs counter to the majority view. A historical review into the rise of Christianity across the Roman Empire over the first four centuries AD, revealed a number of social cultural factors which were unique to the time and are not applicable to contemporary British culture. Heralding a new world-view and offering a sense of salvific hope to people whose lives were miserable, short and crisis-driven, Christianity was in a key position to take advantage of valuable opportunities to grow and flourish. It is therefore arguable that modern culture presents a very different challenge which is embedded in affluence, pluralism, individualism and weak acquaintance with the Gospel message in Britain for many; in particular this echoes O'Callaghan's assertions that the contemporary secularisation is embedded within a culture which has wilfully turned its back on faith amid the dynamics of modernity (2017). The role of social networks was identified as a common thread in the spread of ancient Christianity. Obedience to God was reflected in the sharing and selling property to give to others (Acts 2:42, NRSV), and as such undergirds the key role that relationships and interpersonal bonds played in religious conversion from both a historical and contemporary perspective.

From a micro perspective, the work of Lofland and Stark (1965) and later, Lofland and Skonovd (1981) was pivotal to this review and to the research model in offering a comprehensive model which with to evaluate the causal factors behind individual religious choice, belief and commitment. Discussion of the key components of recruitment and commitment to new religious movements were found to be crucial in identifying the forces which push a person towards religion and to non-conformity. Conversion motifs and their accompanying variations were found to be a flexible tool in identifying the factors which influence people to pursue religion and in being responsive to discovering new motifs which would be relevant to modern British

society. The review considered the significance of ritual and performative belief as a way of fostering meaning and belonging, in addition to solidifying the collective and individual identity. It is possible to suggest that these are core characteristics of the human condition which are constant and in which religion plays a key role for people. Fowler's research exploring faith development theory was identified as another way of interpreting key, shared moments associated with life-stages, which present gateway opportunities for religion to play a part. Sherry Weddell's work on spiritual thresholds raises the issue of the consequences of conversion and the responsibility of the Church to avoid the 'sales pitch' approach in favour of forming missionary disciples.

Rambo's seven stage model for the process of religious conversion was considered finally and was found to be comprehensive, appealing to the final stages of consequences and results regarding the conversion journey. His model is particularly compelling due to its multi-faceted and contextually sensitive approach but also in providing a complimentary tool of analysis to use in conjunction with Lofland and Skonovd's conversion motifs when evaluating the findings of this research.

## 4 CHAPTER FOUR: Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

In Chapter One I discussed the impact of David Yamane's work as a pivotal factor in driving my decision to focus this research on contemporary Catholic conversion.

Through a socio-cultural contextualisation of British secular culture in Chapter Two, I highlighted the significant number of Britons who decide to become Catholic each year, about whom very little is known. A review of the literature in Chapter Three focused on the lack of detailed studies of individuals undergoing Catholic conversion in England and Wales, or elsewhere in Britain and a general lapse of sociological attention towards British Catholicism.

In attempting to broaden the current understanding of contemporary Catholic conversion in the UK, this research engaged with fifty-three people from twelve parishes in the Archdiocese of Southwark. Of these, twenty-two participated in qualitative interviews, four consented to be interviewed for a second time after one year and four members of the clergy and catechists conducted interviews relating to their role as advocates. This chapter begins by exploring the theoretical framework used, specifically focusing on the reasons why I chose to adopt an interpretivist approach and connecting my own personal motivations for conducting this research. The discussion then moves to describe the research methods used and discusses some of the pertinent issues which arise in the sociological study of religion, specifically those relating to religious change and conversion. These include the practicalities involved in

conducting research on a small, hard to reach population, the positionality of the researcher, reflexivity and bias.

#### **4.2 Research questions and conceptual themes**

This research wanted to provide answers to the question ‘Who Joins the Catholic Church and Why?’ and this led to development of two core aims:

(1) to map the profile of individuals choosing to convert to Catholicism in parishes in the Archdiocese of Southwark in 2018 and

(2) to explore the key motivations, factors and experiences which are influential for people choosing to become Catholic in contemporary culture.

In the process of investigating these questions, I also wanted to understand some important secondary objectives: (a) whether the traditional conversion motifs identified in Lofland and Skonovd’s work continue to operate in the same ways or whether new, emerging motifs have developed in response to an increasingly secular culture. And (b) to explore the dominant markers operating for individuals establishing or re-claiming a Catholic identity.

As delineated in detail in the previous chapter, the thesis is structured around three main conceptual themes: i) **conversion**, with particular reference to its conceptualization within the sociological literature by Lofland and Stark (1965), Lofland and Skonovd (1981) and Rambo (1989, 1993, 2014); ii) **Catholicism**, making explicit comparative connections to Yamane’s US study (on the value of comparative work between the similar-but-different contexts of British and American Catholicism, see Bullivant 2019: 11-12); and iii) **identity formation**, exploring the contemporary search for meaning and belonging (Day 2013; Woodhead 2016:265) and the gradual awakening to belief and commitment (Fowler 1984:61; Weddell 2012:128; Rambo 1993:124).



### **4.3 Theoretical Framework**

#### **4.3.1 Epistemology - Claim to knowledge**

The focus of this research resides with the empirical data which will inform, explore and lead to a fuller understanding of the Catholic conversion experience for individuals in a specific place and time – most specifically so that the contextual nature of this experience can be represented and understood. This depth of understanding is crucial so that the reader can fully know the research participants, their age, gender, location, family structure and religious background and to have this information undergird the rich narrative of conversion experience. As such, this research claims to adopt an interpretivist approach to knowledge, always being mindful that the data will yield multiple interpretations of the conversion experience, to be explored within the models of Lofland and Skonovd and Rambo, as opposed to an understanding of simply a process to be measured (Hammersley 2012:26).

Creswell suggests that the interpretivist approach is most appropriate to research whose aim is to develop an understanding of a specific phenomenon rather than deriving results which are generalisable for the wider population (Creswell 2007). This approach seemed most applicable to the focus of this research within the framework of a case study model; concentrating on the experiences of people becoming Catholic in the Archdiocese of Southwark, I was presented with the opportunity to understand conversion within the context of one UK diocese which was both distinctive in profile and ethnically diverse. Since it is possible only to fully understand the ‘gritty’ nature relating to the path to conversion through discussion, the interpretivist approach seemed most appropriate since it ‘allows the researcher to investigate and prompt things that we cannot observe, researchers can probe an interviewee’s thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives’ (Wellington and Szczerbinski 2007:81).

One of the disadvantages of the interpretivist approach is the claim that results are context specific and not generalisable so as to emerge with direct outcomes which are useful and valid. However there have been numerous findings in this research which have implications for the Church and its programme of evangelisation, which could point towards recommendations for further development and areas of potential for future research. In this way it is hoped that the findings of this research will overcome the critiques relating to the practicability of research derived through the interpretivist approach.

#### **4.3.2 Ontological approach**

The core emphasis for this research lies with the individual experience of conversion, within the narrative which explains the unique character of spiritual transformation, and which ultimately leads to understanding. The role of the researcher in this process is one of active participation and interaction and as such, the importance of situating the researcher's personal position becomes a primary grounding point (Ely et al. 1991). Before exploring some key issues regarding researcher positionality and reflexivity, I have chosen to begin the discussion with a reflection on my own personal motivations for conducting this research topic.

#### **4.3.3 Personal motivations for research**

Popular American writer Mark Shea suggests that the key distinction between converts and 'cradle' Catholics lies in the pivotal, crisis moment when, adult assent toward the faith as a body of doctrines must be given. Those for whom the decision has been made as an infant, perhaps do not experience the opportunity to reassert their faith in the drama of adult initiation, rather they continue on the journey in the familiar territory of ascribed Catholic identity, with all its accompanying taken-for-grantedness. As Shea notes, the principal experience of the Church for cradle Catholics is as family, 'Oh sure,

there are those little rituals we do now and then, when we are asked if we [really] believe the Creed and so forth. But that's just one of those things the family does--like flag salutes' (Shea 2016).

Falling into the 'cradle' Catholic camp, my own childhood memories confirm the experience of family at Mass each week. A glance sideways in the pew would reveal my grandparents who had attended our church in South-East London for sixty years, on the other sat my mother, brother, aunt, uncle and cousins, since in those days we attended Mass as a family unit. Over the following years, my grandparents passed away and some of my close family moved on and the old securities of my family began to fragment.

Living away at university, I had plenty of opportunities to leave faith behind, but instead Church represented both a physical and spiritual anchor in the midst of massive transition and change. When I returned home, married with children, the church of my childhood became the church for my own family, where my sons were initiated into the Catholic faith and became altar servers until their late teens. There is a dangerous temptation to believe that things will continue as they have always done.

For my eldest son, life at university gradually eroded his faith. When he returned home, he no longer attended Mass with my dwindling family group. Discussions began around the claims of science and rationalism over faith and the works of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Stephen Hawking, amongst others were discovered. For him, faith now represented a whimsical and outdated legacy of childhood, put aside in preference of the consideration of infinitely more serious matters. As time progressed, I realised that all positions on the religious spectrum were now occupied by various members of my family, from the extremes of atheism to strong faith and all else

in between. I was now accompanied to Mass by two out of my three sons and my mother – I had become the driver, both literally and figuratively, responsible for bringing everyone to Church and if I didn't attend, neither would anyone else. I was experiencing first hand the uneasy reality of disaffiliation and religious decline, the nostalgic memory a strong, traditional family heritage which had indeed been taken for granted, and the anxiety for a future in which the once dominant Church was now commonly referred to as a fading institution.

At the risk of co-opting one of the afore-mentioned 'grand-narratives' of secularisation, two developments presented me with the opportunity to question whether the future was as clear and predictable as the statistics suggested. Over the course of five years, my job as a youth coordinator for a deanery of parishes in Southwark led me to meet vast numbers of young people of all ages who were open and enthusiastic about their faith. They were indeed the group of greatest concern for their parish communities, who spoke apprehensively of the 'Confirmation of Exit' which would see teenagers disappearing from the pews, with a possibility of returning as adults, if at all. The anxiety about moving forward as a withering community, losing the tools to transmit faith to the youth who represent the future of the Church, was palpable. This meant that parishioners and clergy were only too ready to cater for the youth who had become their priority and in return those young people responded positively, in surprising numbers.

Visiting churches to promote youth events at which I was required to address congregations, I was shocked at the burgeoning parish communities. Rather than the exception, it was the rule to attend a church where it was difficult to find a seat unless you arrived twenty minutes before the beginning of Mass, and who comprised communities of parishioners who were engaged, active and joyful in their faith – with a

readiness to meet the needs of its people where they were, it occurred to me that this was not the picture of decline bleakly presented in the statistics.

Within this time, my middle son left for university and in his second year, experienced a profound deepening of his faith which has changed the course of his life. As a parent, the likelihood of children continuing their faith once they have left home is an unknown variable and certainly, neither experience of my sons is definitive, since the path of spiritual conversion is an ongoing journey. His experience however confirmed in a profoundly tangible way the unexpected and transformative power of an evangelising faith, a faith which will not be constrained by patterns and predictions and which has the potential to challenge and surprise, to be a source of hope. My interest was peaked both at the causal factors and experiences which caused some to lose the vibrancy of their faith to a point where it was no longer part of their identity and conversely, those mechanisms, factors, experiences which for others, causes a re-ignition of spiritual fervour so profound that their life is transformed.

It is hopeful to explore the ways in which God can penetrate the lives of human beings, causing meaningful and lasting change, particularly within a culture which has become increasingly intolerant of faith and religious practice. As Bernard Lonergan suggests, it is in the narratives of people who stand as exceptions to the societal 'norms' which provide the answers to the persistence and resilience of the Catholic tradition and therein lies the hope. Finally as Shea concludes, for me, it is a privilege to gain a glimpse into the 'pivotal' moment which results in the adult assent toward faith, towards the drama of religion which can often get lost in the familiar territory of the 'cradle' Catholic.

#### **4.3.4 Insider/Outsider bias**

The proximity of being a Catholic researcher exploring conversion to the Catholic faith raises interesting issues regarding subjectivity. Questions inevitably arise regarding the extent to which is it possible to distance oneself sufficiently to remain in any way objective and to avoid the tendency for confirmation bias; this term refers to the inclination to find evidence to confirm expectations and the failure to register relevant counter evidence (Gray 2010:356). Being a Catholic investigating people wishing to become Catholic – as I discussed more fully in the Introduction – clearly necessitates consideration of insider bias, a term which refers to the position of a researcher who exists within the membership of populations to be studied (Kanuha 2000). Whilst some suggest that having prior membership status could enhance the breadth and depth of the study due to enhanced understanding, obvious issues regarding subjectivity, authenticity of data and reflexivity arise due to the assertion that the researcher is too close to the identified research community (Kanuha 2000:444) Reflexivity is the ‘active acknowledgement by the researcher that her/his own actions and decisions will inevitably impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation’ (Horsburgh 2003:309). As Sword asserts, ‘no research is free of the biases, assumptions, and personality of the researcher and we cannot separate self from those activities in which we are intimately involved’ (Sword 1999:277). In this way, Berger is keen to offer strategies to ensure the necessary balance is achieved between the experience of the researcher and that of the participants. She proposes three measures consisting of a log of the initial encounter, repeated review and peer consultation (Berger, 2013).

Amidst the mounting data supporting widespread religious decline, the subject matter of this research has the potential for positive and hopeful results and in this regard, I have

attempted to remain aware and cognisant of my position as an ‘insider’. Throughout the qualitative interviews I have employed vigilance when listening for all data, not simply that which confirms or points in a hopeful direction. My religious background and experiences as a ‘cradle’ Catholic have contributed to the world-view, perceptions and insights I bring to the empirical nature of this research and so whilst it would be impossible to be completely objective, I feel it is important to be clear and mindful about my status from the outset.

Whilst it is accurate to say that my insider status as a Catholic makes it difficult to remain completely objective, it is important to highlight my inexperience regarding the process of Catholic adult initiation. Personally, this remains a relatively new area of knowledge since historically, I have never been involved with this area of ministry and as such, I remain an outsider in some sense, to this community of research participants.

Having almost completed data collection, I found that being Catholic seemed to assist the process of gaining access to groups of individuals in parish settings. I was able to demonstrate an understanding of the process of formation and catechesis and acknowledgement of the need for sensitivity around those agreeing to participate in the research. During the qualitative interviews, there was an accepted sense of commonality between the research participants and myself which allowed conversations in the interview to flow smoothly due largely to a shared understanding of distinctive Catholic references and terminology. Berger identifies and concurs with the range of benefits available to the ‘insider’ researcher; these include facilitating access to the ‘field’ and to participants who are willing to share more easily in response to a sympathetic background (De Tona 2006), shaping the researcher-researched relationship and the bringing of a similar worldview and construction of reality (Kacem and Chaitin 2006; see also Berger 2015).

Watson suggests that despite numerous benefits afforded by the ‘insider’ researcher, there are also a number of costs involved, one of which lies in the analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data. He explains, ‘I still remain unclear whether this is my interpretation of an actual phenomenon, or if I am projecting my own need...onto my participants’ (Watson 2009). Corbyn and Dwyer conclude that being an insider does not preclude a researcher from forming a negative bias and that there can be many benefits to belonging to the population in question. Overall, they suggest that the most important function of the researcher is to be authentic, open and honest in the stories and experiences of their research participants and committed to ‘adequately and accurately’ representing their views and perspectives (2009).

#### **4.3.5 Researching religion – an inherent complexity**

Roof suggests that choosing an appropriate research design in the study of religion is made more complicated by the ‘interdisciplinary nature of the field and the complexity of ‘religion’ itself (Roof 2014:68). He contends that since the study of religion lacks its own methodological approach, it must borrow methods and logics of study from other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. As a field, religious research exists as an ‘intellectual hybrid’ with roots in history, philosophy, psychology, sociology and anthropology to name but a few and maintains that in the study of religion, ‘there is no singular, widely accepted paradigm’ (2014:69).

Although firmly rooted in the sociological, this research seeks to adopt an interpretivist approach with which to navigate the lived experience of Catholic conversion in contemporary culture and in doing so, will draw from historical, psychological and anthropological sources, amongst others, along the way.



In qualitatively exploring the experience of religious encounter and transformation, the research frequently touches the theological boundaries of the conversion experience and the researcher engages in the empirical observation of the ‘unobservable’(Jensen 2014:50). This necessarily requires the adoption of ‘methodological agnosticism’ which has been argued by scholars such as Berger (1967). This term relates to the bracketing of metaphysical questions in order to concentrate on the observable impact of religious phenomena, remaining neutral to the possibility of the agency by God, and/or supernatural agents (Bullivant and Lee, 2016). Barker offers specific guidance in the investigation of religious conversion, when she references the vignette of a participant who offers a choice of reasons why she chose to join a new religion, ‘The sociologist...cannot say which, if either, is the correct explanation – but merely reports what people believe’ (Barker 2010:14).

#### **4.4 Research Design**

##### **4.4.1 Selecting a Case Study design**

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes (Creswell et al. 2007:33)

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of Catholic conversion, a case study approach was selected since this strategy of research has been shown to be an effective methodology to investigate, explore and understand complex issues in real-world contexts. This study chose to focus on the Archdiocese of Southwark which is supported by Merriam’s defining characteristic of case study research which is bounded by ‘a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries’ (1998:27)

Case study research design seems to demonstrate a practical versatility and as such is not 'not assigned to a fixed ontological, epistemological or methodological position' (Rosenburg and Yates 2007:447), but provides an opportunity for an interpretivist perspective which allows for multiple meanings and realities to exist. Case study research design demonstrates a flexible and pragmatic approach which displays inherent characteristics described by Merriam as particularistic, descriptive and heuristic, highlighting the purpose and qualitative nature of case study research and, the motivation to understand and describe the findings (Harrison 2017:27).

Case study research typically utilises qualitative and quantitative data sources, selected to encapsulate the complexity of the phenomenon. Merriam offers precise direction for the researcher employing a case study design in terms of using a theoretical framework to define the problem, and suggests sampling of the case (and within the case) from typical or unique examples or a range of examples to achieve maximum variation.

Stake suggests that case-study research works well with an interpretivist perspective which seeks to discover meaning and to understand experience in context. The role of the researcher is critical in interpreting multiple and subjective realities of the case or cases to be studied, which are selected based on the richness they can bring to the research.

With this approach, both quantitative and qualitative data sources are used and selected on their suitability to explore the complexity of the problem. Merriam (1998) suggests sampling both of and within the case from examples which are typical, unique or a range of characteristics using maximum variation. The researcher will collect data in real world settings, such as parishes, participants' homes or nearby locations of their choice and findings are achieved through direct interpretations and through categorical

or thematic groupings. Stake suggests the use of vignettes and narrative to convey effectively the thick descriptors of each participant (Stake 1995:26).

In line with Stake's interpretivist perspective, adopting a case study strategy was felt to be the most appropriate means through which to gain a full understanding of the individual, social, cultural and religious factors involved in the contemporary context of Catholic parish life in the Archdiocese of Southwark. In gaining insight into the multifaceted nature of religious conversion in context, it is important to emphasise that the findings generated through case study research are unlikely to be generalisable.

#### **4.4.2 Understanding the broad demographic profile of Southwark Archdiocese and London**

The Archdiocese of Southwark was selected for its diverse and distinctive characteristics. Southwark is a large diocese and covers the whole of London, south of the River Thames and the County of Kent down to Dover. The diocesan area covers 76 miles east to west covering approximately 1,680 miles, 85% of which is in Kent. The Archdiocese comprises 180 parishes and 20 deaneries; the Diocesan area comprises the Kent Pastoral area (50 parishes), the South East Pastoral area (66 parishes) and the South West Pastoral area (64 parishes).

Significantly 60% of the diocesan population who attend Mass live in South London. Southwark has seen significant cultural change over recent years due to increasing immigration with parishes representing a diverse range of cultures, especially in London.

It seems pertinent at this point to reflect on the current demographic context surrounding Southwark and particularly to consider the cultural, social and ethnographic change within London over the last 50 years. London's population has seen dramatic

change over the last century; the population dropped from pre-World War II figures of 8.6 million people in 1939, to 6.8 million in 1980, with Central London claiming the more dramatic reduction by 50% (Trust for London 2021). Nationally, by 1950 there were 2,754,249 Catholics in England and mass attendance was over 70%. Harris observes that nearly half of this cohort were concentrated in the industrial, urban areas of the north of England, in towns such as Lancashire. She highlights a less visible but statistically significant concentration (potentially 50%) of Catholics living in the south and particularly within London's suburbia (2013:35).

The demography of this 50's Catholic community was characterised through post-war migration of at least 300,000 Irish people seeking employment opportunities, Polish refugees and European Voluntary Workers in addition to benefiting from a boost from the baby boom generation. Census data collected from 1981 and 1991 reflect the number of people in England who had been born in Ireland remained at three quarters of a million, with a noticeable decline in Polish-born people to 68,000 by 1991. Compared with estimates from 1971, around one quarter of Catholics in England Wales were born outside Great Britain (half in Ireland) and Hornsby-Smith observes the lack of empirically grounded research studies exploring the experiences of immigrants over three decades (Hornsby-Smith 1999:9).

Although initially, almost 70% of Catholics were classified as being 'working class', the new context was one of increased social mobility supported by the welfare state, younger generations achieving higher education status and taking up more professional roles. The turn of the twentieth century witnessed the move for London to become more heterogenous, with entrepreneurial Catholics becoming increasingly visible in industry and politics, responsible for the creation of much needed Catholic secondary schools and societies (Harris 2013:35).

With a population of more than nine million people, between 2010 and 2020 London witnessed one of the fastest expansion rates compared with other areas of England. The growth rate in London is reported to be 10% higher than England's overall growth rate at 6%; Central London has seen the largest growth (14%), closely followed by East London (13%).

In terms of ethnicity, 40% of people living in London are from Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) groups and 37% were not born in the UK. This figure is contrasted with much lower proportions in other areas in England, which see around 11% of people from BME groups. The population density of London sits at 12,475 and as such, is 15 times higher than the rest of England, which cites 369 people per square metre. Although the figures recovered somewhat during the 1990's, it is estimated that the population will increase to 9.4 million by 2030 (Trust for London 2021).

Additionally, the Archdiocese has seen an increase in the appointment of clergy from all over the world, who are both familiar and reflective of the cultural diversity which has become characteristic of the Southwark Archdiocese (Southwark Catholic Directory 2018:3). I felt that Southwark would be an especially interesting focus for a case study within which to explore the subject of Catholic conversion based on the distinctive geographical and socio-cultural characteristics which exist and having gone through significant cultural change over recent years.

Southwark Archdiocese is known to me both personally and professionally and it was felt that this sense of familiarity would be helpful in the recruitment and general willingness of parishes to participate in the research. Having a practical working knowledge of the geographical layout of the Archdiocese facilitated travel to parishes in

a range of locations and this had a positive impact on the management of the research timeframes.

#### **4.4.3 Conceptual Framework**

Alongside Lofland and Skonovd's model (1981:375), I chose to use Rambo's framework (1993:168-169) for describing the process of religious change in the conversion experience. As considered in depth in Chapter Three, Rambo's model of religious change provides a flexible framework which accepts that conversion may be subject to a broad range of forces, that conversion is a process, rather than a single event and is contextual and must be considered in the light of relationships, processes and ideologies, which he maintains provide the 'matrix' for religious change. Rambo asserts that the factors involved in the conversion process are multiple, interactive and cumulative and this becomes appropriate for the interpretivist perspective adopted by this research, which places focus on the context of the individual and the meaning making dimension (1989:49). It is both interesting and reassuring that both Lofland and Skonovd and Rambo's model have been adopted in recent doctoral research exploring the conversion and de-conversion processes to and from Islam (Alydreessy 2016).

#### **4.5 Methods**

To increase the reliability and rigour of case study research, Yin recommends that data collection is carried out using a series of structured steps, includes both quantitative and qualitative data and integrates multiple evidence sources such as fieldnotes, observations, documents and narratives (Yin 2014:19).

##### **4.5.1 Early study design – reflexivity and adaption**

As a qualitative researcher with previous experience working in health care research, the contrast of conducting religious research was striking in terms of research design,

population size and gaining access to research participants. Whilst the identification of health care research participants related to a specific condition is easily obtainable through centrally held databases, the process of identifying people in parishes interested in becoming Catholic and gaining access to them was challenging and required flexibility and adaption of the initial research design.

I initially intended to adopt an explanatory sequential approach to data collection, first administering the quantitative survey to individuals registered to begin RCIA programmes in 25-50 parishes in the Archdiocese of Southwark, analysing the results, then moving on to conduct the qualitative interviews. An initial sample of 50 parishes, selected to be representative of the 20 deaneries in the Archdiocese, were invited by email to take part in the research which sought to recruit participants who fulfilled the eligibility criteria: aged 18 years and over, had expressed an interest in becoming Catholic and who were currently registered to attend RCIA classes. After two email reminders over the course of a three-week period, 19 replies were received from 50 invitations issued. Of these replies 9 parishes reported to have no RCIA programme running, 3 parishes declined, 6 agreed to participate and 1 parish was unsure.

As more emails were subsequently received from parishes, it became evident that many parishes were either not running an RCIA programme or using alternative approaches. As such, it was clear that relying on the RCIA as an inclusion criteria was obscuring a very important early finding; a diverse range of approaches existed within parishes for people interested in becoming Catholic and that RCIA was by no means comprehensively delivered by parishes in Southwark Archdiocese.

This finding affected the original study design in three main ways, (1) timing, (2) timeframe and (3) adaption of the research materials. The reality of working with such

a small population of parishes meant that the timing of the research design had to be adapted for this set of circumstances. Relationship building with some parishes in the early phase of recruitment took much longer than anticipated; in some cases, access to research participants took between 4-6 months from the beginning of data collection whilst other parishes agreed immediately to become involved. Parish recruitment became a staggered process, which meant that the quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently rather than sequentially, as originally planned.

The original study design incorporated the RCIA timeframe as a guide for data collection since parish programmes tend to begin around the beginning of September and often result in individuals being received into the church at Easter, although some people continue longer if necessary. As the research was now keen to capture the variety of conversion approaches running in parishes in this case study, the timeframe for data collection was widened to run from September 2018 until July 2019. Finally, it was necessary to make small changes to the quantitative survey and qualitative interview schedule to remove undue emphasis on the RCIA and to remain open to identifying and understanding alternative approaches.

This early process was highly instructional in highlighting the assumptions which can be involved in early research design and the need to remain open to altering and adapting the research strategy to account for the characteristics of the population to be studied. Overall however this early experience demonstrated the practical reality of identifying and working with hard-to-reach populations and with small numbers, which as Navarro-Rivera and Kosmin note, is a unique and distinctive characteristic of conducting religious research (2014:396).



#### **4.5.2 Revised study design – parish recruitment**

Having adapted and revised the research design strategy, invitations were sent to all remaining parishes in the Archdiocese. Of the 55 responses received: 23 parishes expressed an interest in participating, 17 either had no RCIA or alternative programme running and/or individuals considering conversion and 13 clergy declined. Where parishes reported either no individuals presenting in 2018/19, no RCIA or alternative provision running in their parishes, clergy gave details of neighbouring parishes or clusters of parishes who shared provision for individuals seeking conversion. Reasons for parishes who declined included clergy being new to the parish, illness, hectic parish schedules and clergy feeling that the subject area was too sensitive for individuals exploring conversion.

Of the 23 parishes interested in taking part, 12 parishes were selected based on size, ethnography, catechetical approach, geographical location and the number of adult initiations recorded annually in the Southwark directory. Participating parishes came from the following locations: Anerley, Borough, Bromley, Camberwell, Carshalton, Deal, Deptford, Faversham, Mitcham, Rotherhithe, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge, Tonbridge Wells (see Figure 1). There was a great deal of diversity in the ethnic and demographic profile of deaneries in the South East and West of London, compared with those in Kent. The disparity was observed in the greater number of people born outside the UK, lower percentages of people identifying as White and a higher population density per square foot. Statistics from a selection of deaneries is reflected in the table below (City Population, 2020).

Deanery	Population density (p/m <sup>2</sup> )	UK country of birth	Dominant ethnicity	No religion
<b>Kent</b>				
Deal	3,358	95%	98%	31.2%
Sevenoaks	328	91.8%	95.8%	27.3%
<b>South East and West</b>				
Rotherhithe	13,992	56.6%	58.8% White, 15% Asian, Black 14%	29.6%
Camberwell	16,511	53%	53% White, 39% Black	23.2%
Bromley	2,216	85.5%	84.3% White	28.2%

*Table 1 - Demographic statistics for selection of participating deaneries*

The revised study design successfully identified a variety of differing approaches to adult initiation (other than RCIA) in participating parishes which, it was suggested had been in operation for some time. Models identified included the Alpha course (a series of interactive sessions explaining the basics tenets of Christianity) (2020), programmes such as ‘Evangelium’ (2012) and ‘Why?’ DVD (2017) courses and one-to-one instruction from the parish priest (see Stage 4: Encounter). (Southwark Catholic Directory 2018:3)

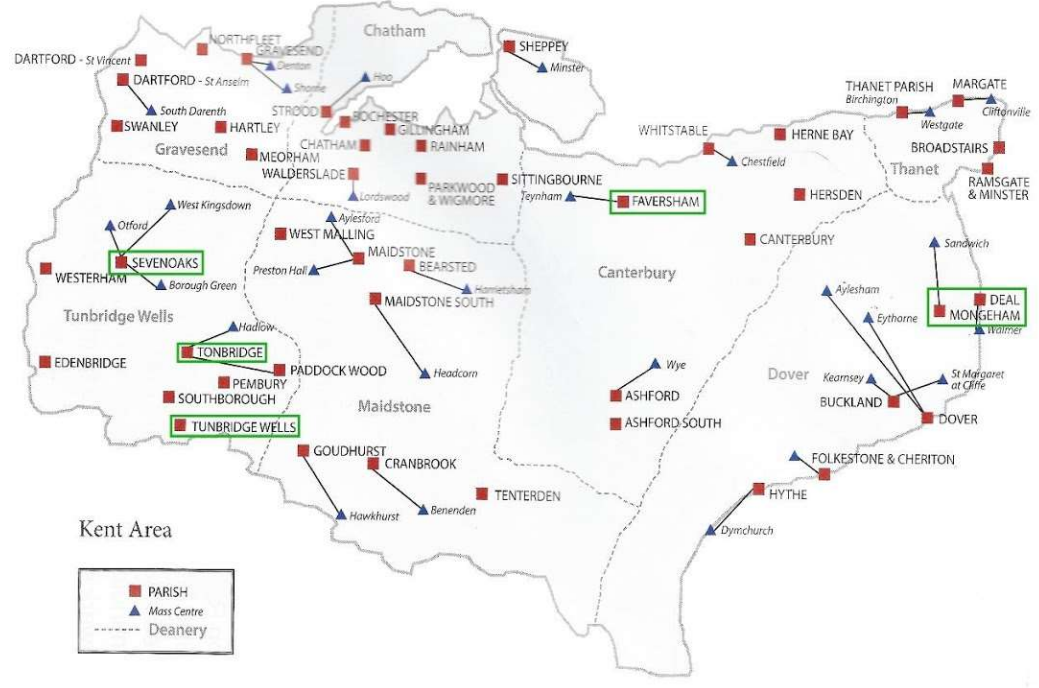
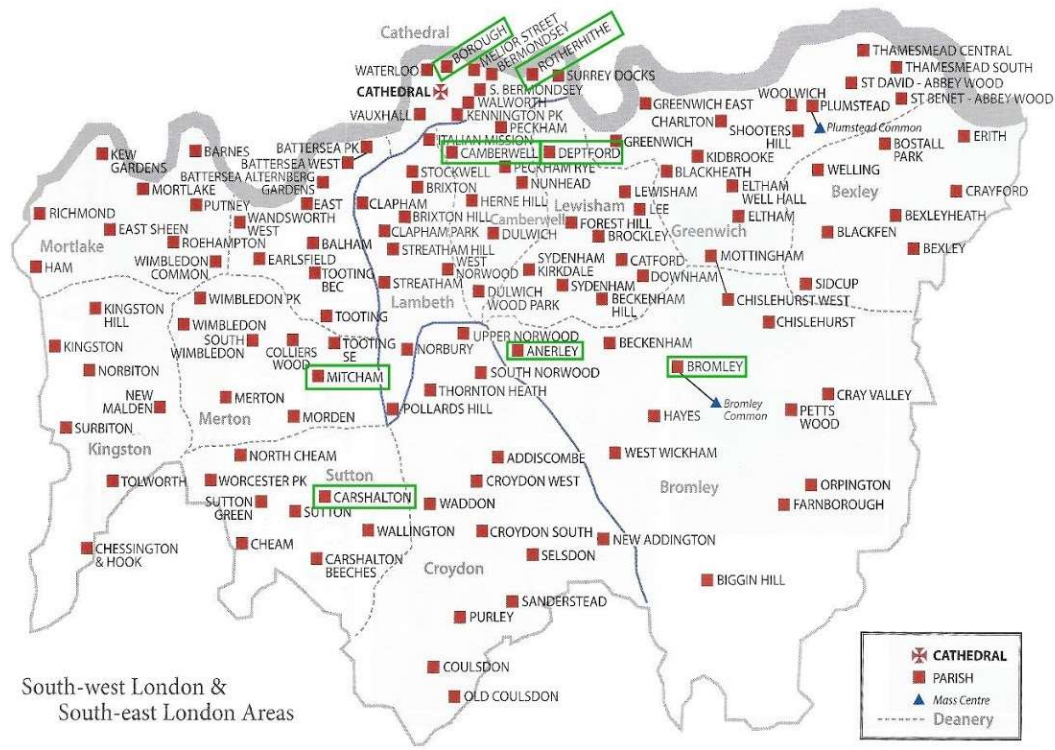


Figure 2: Map of parishes in the Archdiocese of Southwark participating in my research.

Four of the parishes interested in participating in the research belong to the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham; the Ordinariate was established in established in 2011 by Pope Benedict XVI to allow Anglicans to enter into the full communion of the Catholic Church whilst retaining aspects of their heritage and traditions. Contact from parishes of the Ordinariate were immediately significant not only because of their extremely positive response but also for the consistently high numbers of individuals exploring conversion each year. Contact with parishes in autumn 2018 coincided with broad changes in clergy across the Archdiocese, in addition to a move by the diocese to standardise parish email addresses. It is likely that these factors could have affected the initially low response rate of 30% and three reminders were sent via email or follow-up telephone calls to parishes.

#### **4.5.3 6.4 Sampling techniques**

This study employed a purposive sampling scheme to select research participants for both the quantitative and qualitative stages of the research. Purposive or judgement sampling, is defined as the deliberate choice of the researcher to include participants in the study who have specific qualities or characteristics which best inform the interests of the research question. This is a non-random sampling technique which does not rely on underlying theories and does not specify a set number of participants (Palinkas et al, 2015). Having encountered obstacles to recruitment at the start of data collection, convenience sampling was initially considered as it was felt to be the most realistic option in view of such a small population size. However as more and more parishes began to participate, it became clear that there would be a sufficient number of individuals from which to select participants purposively based on their information-rich potential. Typically, considerations for selecting research participants using a purposive sampling strategy are based on their displaying specific characteristics, such

as experience and knowledge of the phenomenon of interest in addition to considerations regarding willingness and availability.

Building solid relationships with parishes and ensuring regular communication with clergy and teams enabled a maximum variation sample of research participants to be selected based on characteristics such as age, marital status, religious background and ethnicity for the quantitative sample. Maximum variation sampling or ‘heterogenous sampling’ allows for the selection of participants who will provide a broad spectrum of information relating to the subject being studied (Palinkas 2015). This sampling method is found to be particularly useful when the population size is small, as was the case in this study.

#### **4.5.4 Quantitative data collection**

Participant Information Sheets, consent forms and quantitative surveys were sent to all the participating parishes. The Participant Information Sheet provided information about the purpose, length and scope of the research, key contact details, confidentiality and data protection. In line with standard research protocols issued by the Research Ethics Committee at St Mary’s University (See Appendix D), participants were assured that all data collected would be anonymised and stored securely on St Mary’s University servers, accessible only by the lead researcher and main supervisor. Participants were also given a separate sheet to sign should they wish to withdraw at any time from the study.

Sending this information directly to parishes relied on clergy, members of the parish team or catechists as the conduit for passing the research materials to individuals in their parish who fulfilled the eligibility criteria. This worked well in the majority of cases, however there were instances where catechists or RCIA leaders made decisions

about when they would distribute the research materials to participants. For parishes that came on board with permission of the parish priest, later consultation with RCIA leaders and catechists revealed concerns about interrupting the sensitive process of early spiritual enquiry and suggested that data collection take place at later stages in the conversion journey. Adopting a reflexive approach has been extremely helpful in highlighting the need to remain flexible in terms of research design, data collection and overall timeframes. The importance of developing good relationships with the parish teams and RCIA leaders has been vital in the process of establishing contact with participants since they occupy a gate-keeping role which at times became a challenge in gaining access to research participants. Conducting research in parish contexts has revealed an ongoing need for sensitivity, relationship-building and often involves a delicate process of negotiation.

I adopted a mixed methods approach for the research which comprised a quantitative survey and semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in a phased approach. David Yamane's research model was used to guide the design of the quantitative survey. The aim of the survey was to contextualise the research sample and thereby to fulfil one of the central aims of this research, which was to be able to offer a demographic profile of contemporary Catholic seekers. In the field of religious research, surveys have been found to be extremely useful to inform and measure trends and patterns over time, such as exploring the spread of Protestantism in Latin America (Bastian 1993:33-61; see also Navarro-Rivera, Kosmin, 2014:397) and in measuring religious identities (Alwin et al 2006:530-64).

The survey was designed to collect the following basic demographic information: age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, employment status, number of children in family, religious upbringing, current religious affiliation (if any) and sacraments of initiation

received (see Appendix A). A free text box asked participants to give the main reasons they were attending the RCIA or alternative programme. The final question on the survey asked people to indicate if they would like to participate in an interview and if so, to provide their preferred contact details. Completed forms were returned by parish clergy or catechists, using a pre-paid postage envelope included with the research materials, via email as a scanned copy from individual research participants or given directly to the researcher if completed prior to the qualitative interview.

#### **4.5.5 Qualitative data collection**

The aims for the qualitative component of the research was to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with approximately 25 research participants. The use of semi-structured qualitative interviews has long been recognised as a way of collecting nuanced information about complex issues such as religious experience (McGuire 2008:5, Constantine et al. 2006); notably, the use of semi-structured interviews has been used in recent doctoral research and highlighted as an effective method for exploring religious change (Alyedreessy 2016:48; Ross 2011:38).

Interview schedules were designed to correspond broadly with Rambo's seven-stage model of conversion, to capture the entire religious journey of the participants, in a sequential, ordered approach (See Appendix B). This provided a framework against which discussion and occurrence of the conversion motifs could be situated with the process of religious change. Before I began to collect the empirical data, I conducted a small pilot with two female Catholic converts to test the research instruments. The insights gained led me to change the phrasing of the first question to specifically mention participant's religious upbringing. Additionally, I changed the order of two broader, more evaluative questions relating to the positive and negative implications of pursuing Catholicism, to take place towards the end of the interview.

The interview questions were structured as follows:

#### **4.5.5.1 Stage 1: Context (First phase interviews)**

Participants were first asked to describe their religious background and upbringing; this opening question was used to capture the micro and macro contextual factors at work, in addition to establishing participants' positioning on the religious spectrum. This was an important area because it has been shown that religious adherence within the family unit can have a profound impact on religiosity later in life (Dreher 2017:122, Ullman 1989).

#### **4.5.5.2 Stage 2: Crisis**

Participants were then asked to describe the circumstances and experiences which had led them to Catholicism; this question drew heavily on the work of Lofland and Skonovd in being able to identify the trigger points, or catalyst moments which were pivotal in their religious awakening. In many ways, participants were encouraged to provide a narrative explaining their early religious journey and as such, would provide space to explore significant influences such as inter-personal bonds and life circumstances (Lofland & Stark 1965:862-875; Lofland & Skonovd 1981:384).

#### **4.5.5.3 Stage 3: Quest**

Participants were asked to consider whether conversion had been a sudden or gradual process, whether they had adopted an active or passive role in their own conversion journey. This question was undergirded by the work of Richardson and Yamane, in the exploration of response style in the pursuit of religion. Including this question was important in the exploration of religiosity within contemporary culture and whether intentional religious choices are afforded higher value when volitional rather than ascribed (Richardson 1985:168; Yamane 2014:113; Travisano 1970:594-606)



#### **4.5.5.4 Stages 4 and 5: Encounter and Interaction**

Participants were asked three questions relating to the process of formal encounter: these comprised asking about their ‘first steps’ on their spiritual pathway, prior knowledge of RCIA or alternative adult formation programme, their experiences and observations of attending formal catechetical sessions. Whilst the focus on this research lay predominantly in the pre-enquiry stages, the influence of Yamane’s work provided a valuable opportunity to explore the significance of rites and rituals in the realm of adult initiation, and the delivery and implementation of adult formation from the perspective of the participant and the advocate (Yamane 2014:113). Participants were asked to think about the key sources of support and areas of challenge and to consider their expectations, hopes and aspirations for the future. Capturing their expectations was significant in the light of the longitudinal interviews which would take place between 12-18months after the first interview.

#### **4.5.5.5 Clergy, advocates, catechists**

Rambo and Yamane emphasise the significance of capturing the perspectives of advocates in the role of religious conversion (Rambo 1993:81; Yamane 2014:155). The interview schedule for advocates and catechists began by asking participants how they define conversion and to reflect on the conversion programme with which they were involved, thinking about what elements work well, which could be improved and how they perceived their role/ ministry in the parish community. Participants were asked for their experience and perceptions regarding the reasons and motivations given by people wishing to become Catholic, especially in light of contemporary culture. Participants were asked about the role of the parish community in adult initiation and finally asked to consider about their hopes for the ‘new’ Catholics.

#### **4.5.5.6 Stages 6 and 7: Commitment and Consequences (Second wave interviews – Sep 19-Mar 20)**

Participants were asked to reflect on their religious journey to become Catholic, to reflect on the impact of their decision to become Catholic on their lives generally and specifically in the relationships of those around them. This was an especially important theme raised by Eileen Barker, when assessing the mental wellbeing of converts in direct relation to comments and reactions of family and friends (1984:234). Scholars have suggested that building in this temporal perspective to the data ‘[offers] a movie rather than a snapshot’ (Neale 2012), asserting that a longitudinal perspective is a constitutive element involved in fully understanding one’s experience (Saldana 2003). Participants were given the opportunity to reflect on their expectations before and after conversion, to facilitate a deeper processing of the dominant factors at work in their conversion journey. It was important to include this longitudinal element within the qualitative research since it provided a unique perspective on the lived experience in relation to perceived expectations of converts and the process of nurturing and building a Catholic identity within a strong, already established culture.

#### **4.5.6 Interview technique**

Interviews took approximately 45 minutes to one hour to complete and were conducted in a location chosen by each participant; these included parish rooms, coffee shops, church buildings. For one research participant living in Portugal at the time of data collection, this interview was conducted by Skype; Skype has been found to be a solid, acceptable alternative to face-to-face interviews when circumstances dictate (Lo Iacono et al 2016). Interviews were recorded with the written consent of research participants. I transcribed each interview myself since it has been found that the process of transcribing is ‘analysis within the perspective’, involves working closely with the

transcript and data to the degree that is a central part of the qualitative research process (Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998:69-72; Davidson 2009:35-52).

Although I originally aimed to conduct twenty-five interviews, I completed data collection after twenty two had been conducted since I felt I had achieved saturation. Saturation is the term used to describe the point at which no new information is being achieved, when the study is able to be replicated with the information gleaned and no new coding is required (Fusch 2015:1408-9).

#### **4.5.7 Qualitative Data Analysis**

All interview transcripts were analysed using NVIVO 12 and data stored securely on St Mary's University servers. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis, a method used for identifying, reporting and analysing patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clark, 2006:79). Whilst Braun and Clarke recognise that thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research, they suggest that the actual process involved in this method is ill -defined and under researched. As such, they provide a six-step framework to assist researchers in conducting this style of analysis. The distinct phases for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke are presented as follows (2006:87) and is in line with Glaser and Strauss' earlier work on grounded theory (1967):

1. Familiarisation with the data
2. Generating initial codes – by identifying interesting features in a systematic fashion across the data
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing the themes in relation to the initial codes so that a thematic map can be produced
5. Defining and naming the generated themes

## 6. Reporting on the data

Having used Braun and Clarke's framework as a guide to developing a thematic map and then defining the emergent themes, I was able to formulate a collection of key themes which could be ordered within Rambo's framework. I decided to group the themes into distinct areas, which broadly corresponded to Rambo's model and would be reported within three separate chapters. The thematic schema can be viewed in Appendix C.

### 4.6 Conclusion: Methodology

This chapter has presented the research methods used to answer the central question driving this research, 'Who joins the Catholic Church and Why', further outlined in the two core aims for this study: (1) to map the profile of individuals choosing to convert to Catholicism in parishes in the Archdiocese of Southwark in 2018 and (2) to explore the key motivations, factors and experiences which are influential for people choosing to become Catholic in contemporary culture. The three main conceptual themes undergirding this research relate to (i) a detailed exploration of **conversion** as conceptualised by Lofland, Stark, Skonovd, and Rambo; (ii) **Catholicism**, making explicit comparative connections to David Yamane's recent US study (on the value of comparative work between the similar-but-different contexts of British and American Catholicism, see Bullivant 2019: 11-12); and (iii) **identity formation**, exploring the contemporary search for meaning (Day 2013:193; Engelke 2017:185; Woodhead 2016:260) and the gradual awakening to belief and commitment (Fowler 1984:57; Weddell 2012:127, Rambo 1993:124).

This chapter has discussed some of the most pertinent issues relating to the sociological exploration of conversion and religious change, focusing particularly on issues relating

to the practicalities of conducting research on small religious groups, the positionality of the researcher, and issues relating to reflexivity and bias. As part of this study, I encountered challenges from the outset in both identifying and making contact with people seeking to become Catholic. Not only were the numbers of people wanting to become Catholic small, making the pool of potential research participants necessarily restricted but there were issues of access from clergy and parish teams, who understandably felt wary about approaching people at a very fragile, spiritual stage. This experience stood in stark contrast to previous experience in health care research, where issues of patient numbers and accessibility were more straightforward.

I became especially conscious of the need to form strong relationships with clergy and parish teams at an early stage of the research process. Not only did this reinforce key characteristics of trustworthiness and integrity, which are essential when working with people in the early stages of spiritual awakening but it also allowed me to observe the unique personality of each pastoral community. It was especially important to remain flexible and adaptable at the research design and implementation stage, taking into account the variability and rich diversity which exists amongst Catholic parishes in terms of the parish teams and ways of working.

In terms of rationale, I felt that choosing a case study approach afforded me the space and variability to account for the rich diversity which exists in the Catholic community. This approach accorded with one of the central aims underlying this study, to provide a detailed picture of contemporary Catholic conversion which would be tailored for the Archdiocese of Southwark, thereby contributing to the ongoing dialogue of evangelisation and mission. Employing a mixed methods approach comprising a demographic survey and use of in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews, proved

to be an effective way of gaining insights into the experiences of religious change, in line with the interpretivist approach.

Overall, I conclude with the observation that as a Catholic researcher studying the phenomenon of religious change and transformation within a Catholic context, reflexivity is vital in terms of continually evaluating my position as an insider. The importance of remaining balanced is especially heightened when exploring Catholic conversion accounts (which are inherently hopeful), and in the reality that it is perhaps impossible to become a neutral bystander, particularly in the face of disconfirming evidence relating to religious decline.

## **5 CHAPTER FIVE: Who is becoming Catholic in the Archdiocese of Southwark? A demographic profile of British Catholic converts.**

In the interests of basic exploration of a group of people who seem to remain the shadows of contemporary religious research, this research project has focused on two key questions: i) who are the people who decide to join the Catholic faith in the Archdiocese of Southwark? and ii) what are their reasons for doing so? A review of contemporary culture and the relevant literature (Chapters Two and Three) underscored the importance of being able to accurately identify and understand the profile, factors, motivations and experiences of people who travel counter to the dominant trends of modern culture. Not only do they have much to share about the nature and character of contemporary Catholicism and its transmission in modern culture, but they provide a crucial window of insight into the manifestation of religious transformation in a thoroughly modern context.

### **5.1 Survey Data: A rich portrait**

In total, 53 people from 12 parishes in the Archdiocese of Southwark agreed to participate in the research. All respondents completed a demographic survey and the information collected provided a rich source of data to enable a profiled snapshot of contemporary Britons wanting to become Catholic. In addition to the demographic questions, a free text box at the end of the survey gave respondents an opportunity to give the reasons why they wanted to become Catholic. Even for the 42% of those who did not wish to participate in a follow-up interview, people often provided lengthy, detailed comments, (in some cases almost narratives) which often spanned the margins

of their A4 survey sheet. With only a very small number of comments boxes left blank, what became evident was that concealed beneath an initial willingness to be counted and explored for the research, there seemed to be an additional desire for people to share their reasoning and rationale for wanting to become Catholic.

This chapter presents a demographic profile of the 53 respondents who completed research surveys from October 2018 to December 2019. The data will first explore their classification within the RCIA as Candidates and Catechumens, in light of official records held by the Archdiocese of Southwark. Demographic data relating to religious upbringing, gender, age, marital status, employment status and ethnicity will be explored and further considered against a presentation of six major themes relating to respondents' rationale for wanting to become Catholic. Finally, Rambo's typology of conversion will be applied to reflect the spectrum of religious experience amongst respondents and to provide a basic foundation upon which to base consideration of the qualitative interviews.

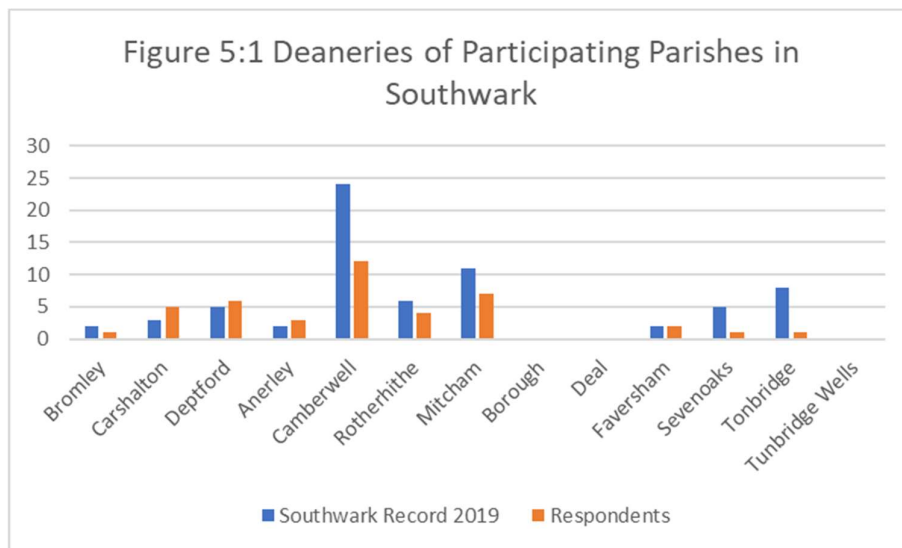
## **5.2 Participating Parishes**

Of the 12 participating parishes in the Archdiocese of Southwark, 10 parishes were using the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA). There was a great diversity in the number of catechetical programmes used within the RCIA and in the style and approach of conducting catechesis and this will be considered in the ethnographic profile of parishes to follow. Three parishes who wanted to participate in the research did not use the RCIA and adopted very different programmes, timeframes and approaches. Unfortunately, one of the three parishes did not have any individuals seeking to become Catholic in 2018/19 although their approach was explored.

Considering the number of parishes who indicated alternative approaches to Catholic conversion and who would not be included in the Archdiocese' official figures within



RCIA, it is important to note that the official numbers will not reflect the total numbers of those deciding to convert in Southwark over the timeframe of the research. Since the majority of participating parishes were following the RCIA process, Figure 3 shows the number of respondents who participated in the research compared to the official numbers of Candidates and Catechumens for all parishes in Southwark Archdiocese in 2019.



*Figure 3: Deaneries of Participating Parishes in Southwark*

Higher numbers of people seeking to become Catholic can be observed in parishes located South East & West areas of the Archdiocese (7 deaneries on left), which comprise the most densely populated areas. The remaining five parishes are located in Kent; the deaneries of Deal and Pembury represent participating parishes in the care of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham. These parishes do not follow the RCIA approach in preparing people to become Catholic and, as such, do not appear in the Southwark record.

### 5.3 Candidates, Catechumens, Neophytes & Religious Upbringing

In 2019, the Archdiocese of Southwark recorded 256 Catechumens (individuals seeking baptism) and 160 Candidates (baptised Christians wanting to become Catholic) for the Rite of Election and the Call to Continuing Conversion at St George’s Cathedral.

Whilst the data show a consistent number of people seeking to become Catholic in Southwark over the last 20 years, the figures reflect a slight increase in the ratio of Catechumens to Candidates over the last 10 years. (It is possible that the 2011 spike in candidates could be related to the reception of ex-Anglicans into the Ordinariate, established by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in 2011 and encouraged also by his Papal visit to the UK in September 2010).

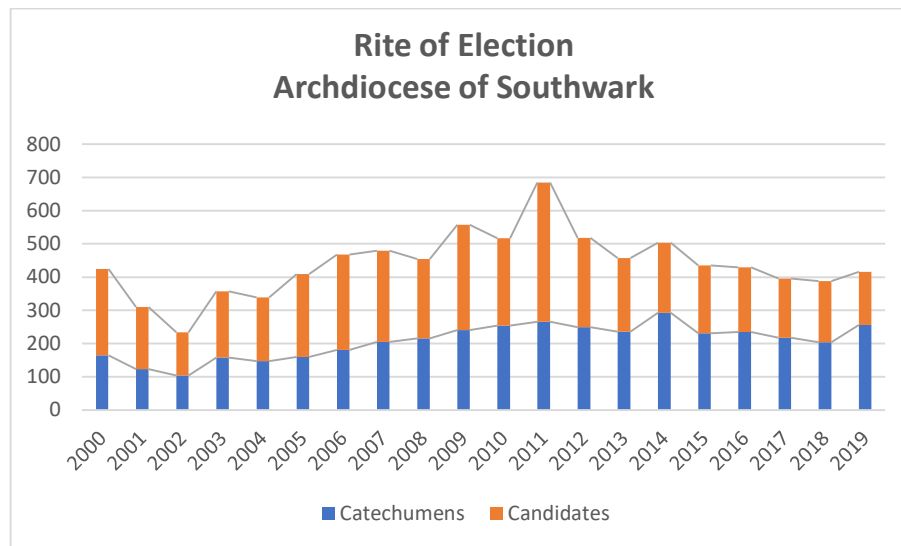


Figure 4: Rite of Election in Southwark Archdiocese

Of the 416 adult receptions into the Catholic Church in Southwark in 2019, 61% were Catechumens and 39% were Candidates.

In this research, of the 53 people who completed research surveys, a slightly different picture is presented, with roughly half (52%) of respondents identified as Candidates.

This broadly aligns with recent statistical findings that the majority of converts to

Christian denominations have already been raised in a different Christian tradition (Bullivant 2015:13). Of the 28 Candidates, the following 20 people had been raised in another Christian tradition: 12 Anglicans, 2 Methodist, 1 Baptist. For the remaining number of Candidates who specified their religious upbringing, 2 were raised with no religion and 2 were raised in a non-Christian religion. The small number of those raised with no religion concurs with the data showing that churches convert very few people with no religious upbringing or those from non-Christian religions. (Bullivant 2015:13)

In relation to religious upbringing of the 20 (38%) Catechumens surveyed, 6 were raised with no religion, 5 were raised in other Christian denominations (1 Pentecostal), 4 raised Catholic, 1 within a non-Christian denomination and 4 not specified. Although the numbers remain small, the total number of Candidates and Catechumens raised with either no religious upbringing or from a non-Christian denomination was 11 (20%) and of these, 6 participated in first wave interviews and 5 agreed to follow-up interviews. Gaining the perspectives of those coming to faith with no prior religious experience was a particularly interesting facet of the research and being able to conduct qualitative interviews with this group was especially valuable.

Interestingly, the Catechumens who had been raised in Catholic families but not baptised said their parents had either displayed a nominal faith relationship, professed a dislike of the Catholic faith or in one case had never revealed their own religious identity to their children. One such respondent wrote that his entire family, including siblings, had been raised Catholic except him. This serves as a strong example of how the loss of religious identity in one generation can result in a fragmented transmission of faith which can subsequently occur within family groups.

After Candidates and Catechumens, 5 people (9%) attending RCIA groups were classified as either Neophytes or Mystagogues. People in this last category indicated that they had already received the Sacraments of Initiation and expressed a strong connection or need to continue some form of ongoing catechesis as a way of deepening or intensifying their faith. This became an important finding throughout the qualitative interviews, the sentiments of which were echoed by people on their journey to become Catholic and will be discussed later in greater depth.

#### **5.4 Gender disparity**

Of the total respondents 36 (68%) were women, an unsurprising result given the gender disparity which is already observed in the contemporary Catholic population (59.1% female), whilst the general population of England and Wales (51.8% female) sees a more equal distribution. This finding supports the assertion that women tend to be dominant 'carriers' of religion, and strengthens the existing positive correlation which exists in the Catholic population between regular Mass attendance and being female (Bullivant 2015:11-13; Bruce 2014:16-17). The graph below shows the gender breakdown of Candidates, Catechumens, Neophytes and Mystagogues and reflects a greater proportion of women amongst Catechumens.

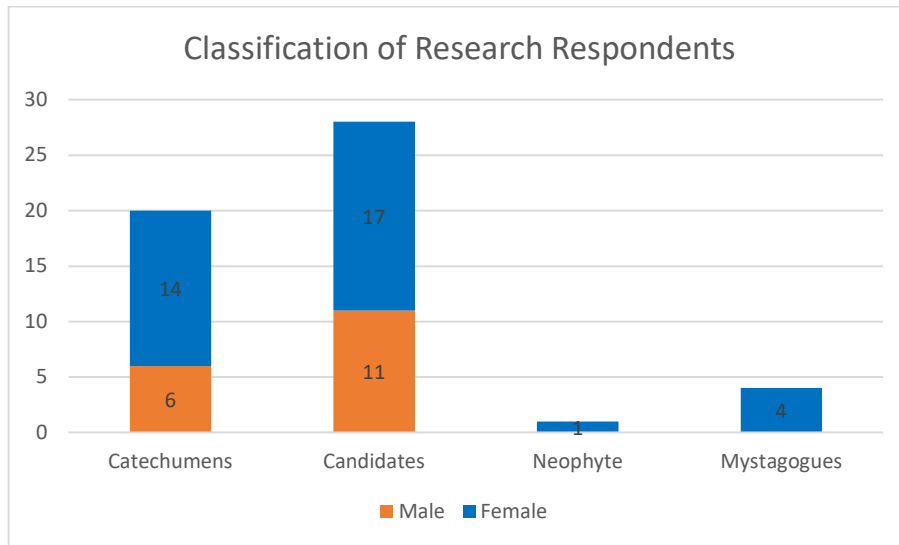


Figure 5: Classification of Research Respondents

## 5.5 Age profile of respondents

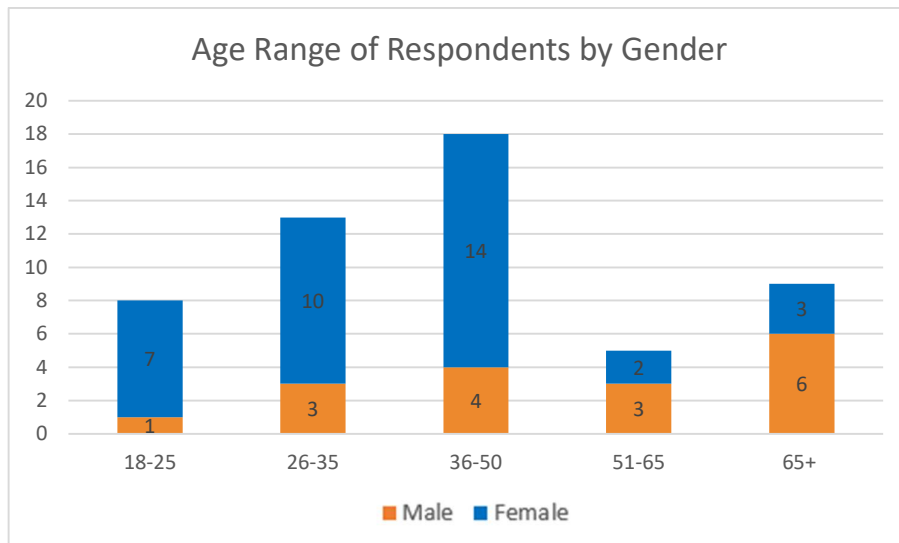
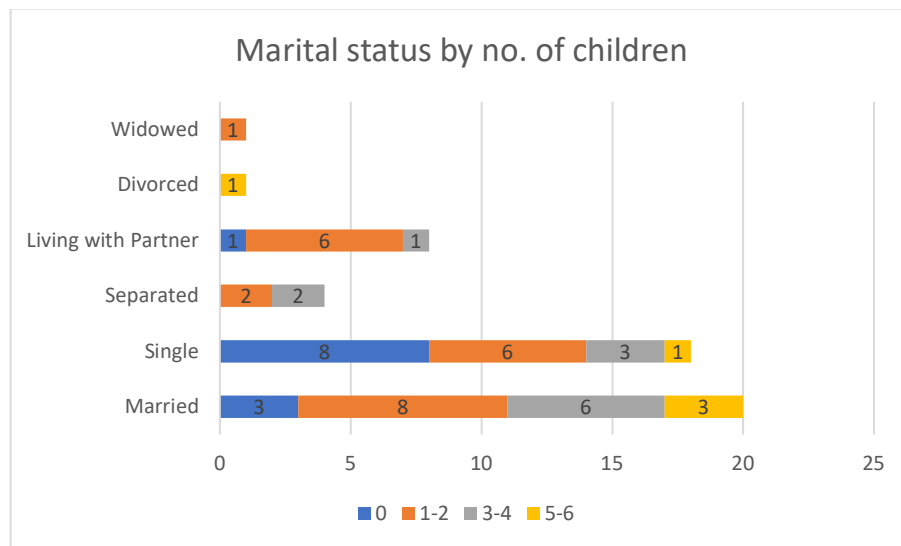


Figure 6: Age Range of Respondents by Gender

With almost one half of the adult Catholic population aged between 35 and 64 (Bullivant 2015:13-15), the two largest age groups represented were 36-50 and 26-35 respectively. 15% of respondents were aged 18-25 years and as such, it is possible to observe a majority (some 74%), belonging to a younger profile of people aged between 18 and 50 years. The smallest group were aged 51-65 years and in contrast to the gender profile discussed previously, more men were found in the group aged 65 years and over.

## 5.6 Marital status and number of children

Of the 50 respondents who answered this question, 20 were married (38%), 18 were single (33%), 8 people were living with a partner (15%) and 4 were separated. The remaining two respondents were widowed or divorced. The following graph shows the number of children people had in relation to their marital status and serves to highlight the diversity of family structures within this cohort of respondents.



## 5.7 Employment status

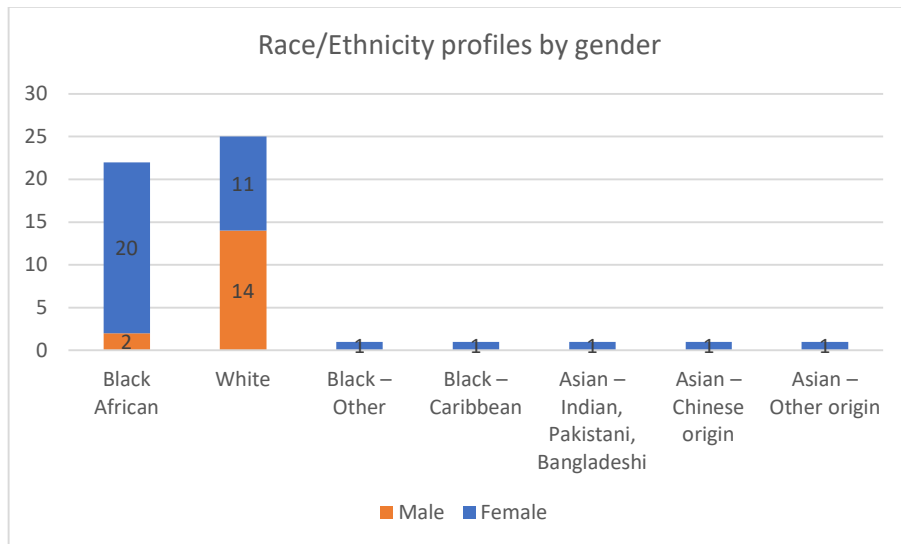
Of the 51 responses to this question, 36 (73%) respondents were employed at the time of completing the survey: 20 people had full time jobs and 16 were employed part time. A further 9 people were retired, 3 unemployed and 3 were students. The high number of those employed either full or part time would seem to indicate a willingness to embark on a programme of spiritual exploration regardless of obligations and time constraints imposed by their jobs.

## 5.8 Race/ Ethnicity of respondents

The two largest ethnic groups of respondents were Black African (22) or White (25).

The ratio of White male to female respondents was fairly equally distributed in contrast

to Black African respondents, who tended to be mostly female. The numbers were small for Black (Caribbean & Other) and Asian (All) respondents, who were all female.



*Figure 7: Race/Ethnicity profiles of respondents by gender*

Greater ethnic diversity amongst respondents was seen in parishes in South East and South West London combined, compared to Kent, a region with a much lower population density. It is perhaps helpful at this stage to compare the ethnicity of respondents from participating parishes (see Figure 8) with the ethnicity of the general population of the geographical area for each parish. (Figure 9).

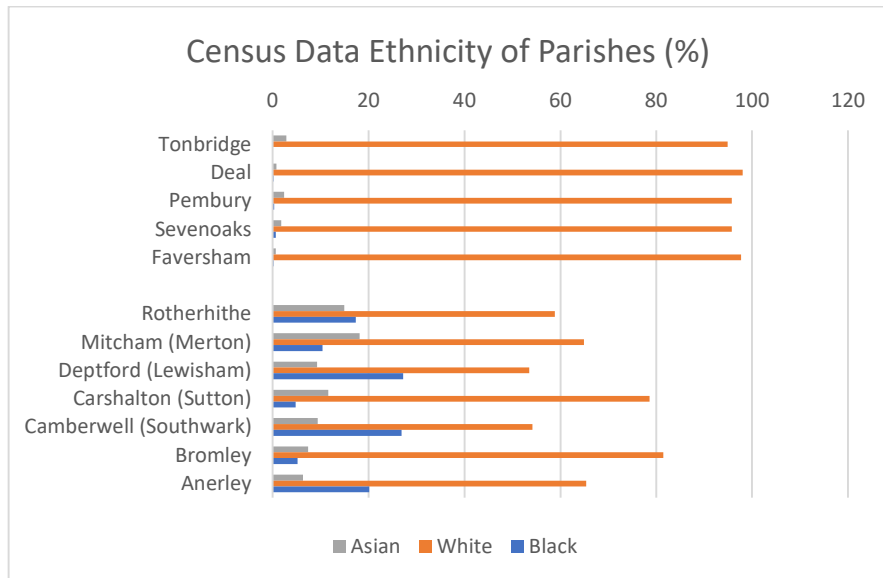


Figure 8: Census Data Ethnicity of Parishes (%)

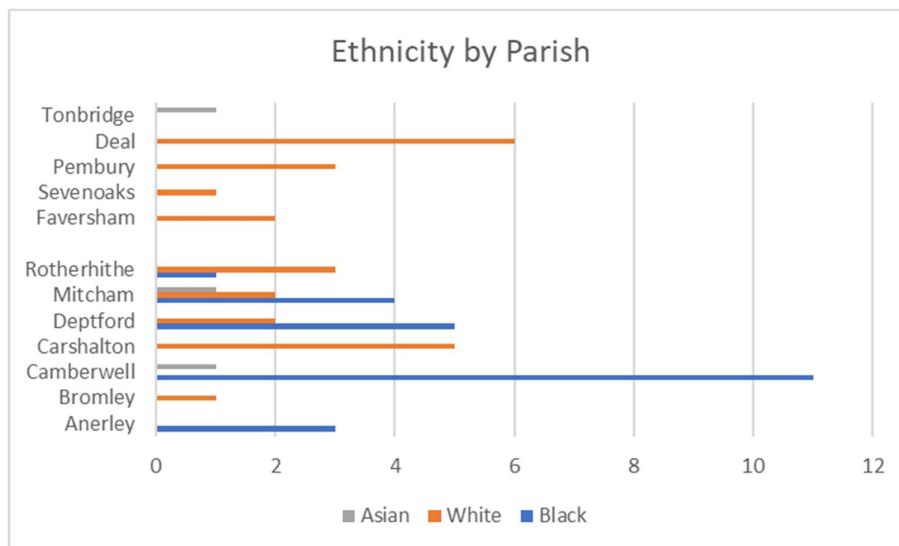


Figure 9: Ethnicity by parish

## 5.9 Rambo's typology as contextual framework

The inclusion of an open-ended question at the end of the survey, asking people why they had decided to become Catholic, provided a valuable source of qualitative data through which it was possible to apply Rambo's typology to classify respondents at this first stage (1993:38-9). Although it was possible to classify respondents fairly easily based on their answers regarding religious upbringing and the sacraments they had



received, the qualitative comments were extremely useful in cases where there was ambiguity. What became clear from the outset, was the range of religious backgrounds and diversity in formation amongst respondents. This conveyed a wide spectrum of religious experience which was not adequately captured through their classification as simply Candidates or Catechumens. Rambo's typology therefore presented a helpful way of establishing a broader contextual framework, upon which it could later be possible to establish what type of conversion could transpire (1983:38).

Rambo provides five major classifications which can be used to describe religious change and are particularly useful given the spectrum of belief and experience observed amongst respondents and in the wider culture generally. Rambo begins with 'Tradition transition' at one end of the spectrum and specifies this as contact between two different cultures, with a variety of ways in which contact can be made. For the purposes of this research, I used this category to identify people who formally identified with non-Christian religious traditions such as Buddhism or Islam. In this category and particularly in contemporary British culture, the potential convert may already be open to contributions from 'outsiders' and there are likely to be fewer forces at work to prevent contact from taking place.

'Institutional transition or 'intra-conversion' is used by Rambo to refer to the process of movement to new religious options within an existing tradition, such as people moving from the Church of England or Methodism to Catholicism. Rambo suggests that movement in this way is relatively easy in urban environments where there is more choice and fewer consequences involved in leaving a particular denomination.

Rambo's third category of 'affiliation' relates to individuals who become involved with a group requiring high levels of commitment and generally involves people with no

prior commitment to another group. Affiliation is likely to take place in a pluralist culture in which people can move easily and in which religious groups can freely proselytise. Rambo cites the example of a young person who becomes involved with the Hare Krishna movement or Unification Church. Although the model of Catholic conversion does not demand the same levels of active involvement from the start, there is a strong level of commitment required which could be argued is high in relation to existing modern cultural parameters. In RCIA people are required to attend a programme of weekly classes which could last as long as one year and must present themselves publicly to the community at certain stages in the rite. In classifying respondents, I have applied this category to people who have experienced little or no prior religious belief or practice, who have subsequently become actively involved in the Catholic community and have conveyed significant levels of commitment.

The fourth category of 'intensification' is used by Rambo to refer to people who experience a desire to deepen their religious commitment within an existing tradition. He specifies that this category is contingent on the ideology of the group and gives the example of the *cursillos* movement in Europe and North America who encourage Christian retreats as a way of revitalising existing Christian commitment (1993:39). I have applied this category to respondents who have been baptised into the Catholic faith and seek to either complete the sacraments of initiation and fully initiated Catholics who want to strengthen or intensify their faith.

Finally, at the opposite end of the spectrum is the category of 'apostasy', 'defection' or 'deconversion' which Rambo uses to signify the complete rejection of a person's religious commitment. This category was not used since the research focused on individuals journeying towards rather than away from faith.

Having applied Rambo's typology to the research participants, it was interesting that the numbers of male and female respondents moving from another Christian denomination to Catholicism was equal, whilst those interested in intensifying their existing faith and moving from a non-Christian tradition were all women (Figure 10).

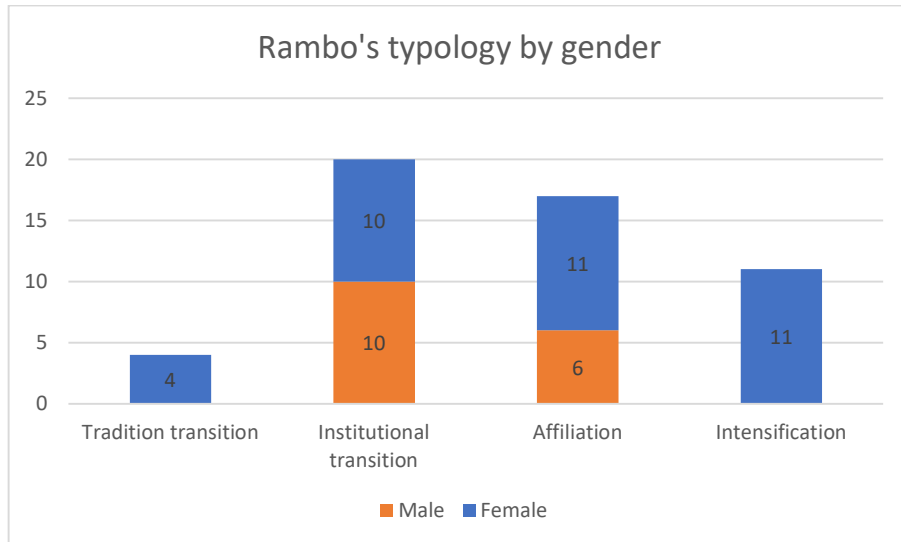


Figure 10: Rambo's typology by gender

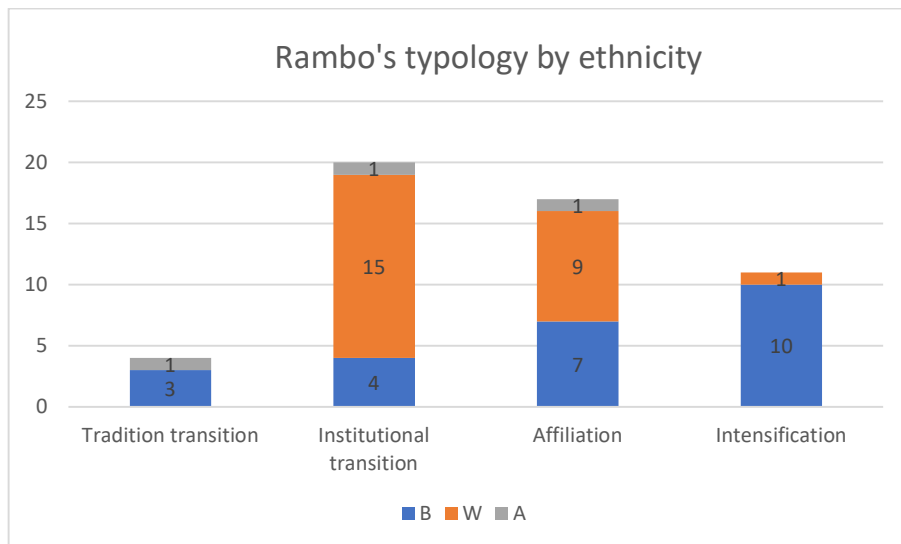


Figure 11: Rambo's typology by ethnicity

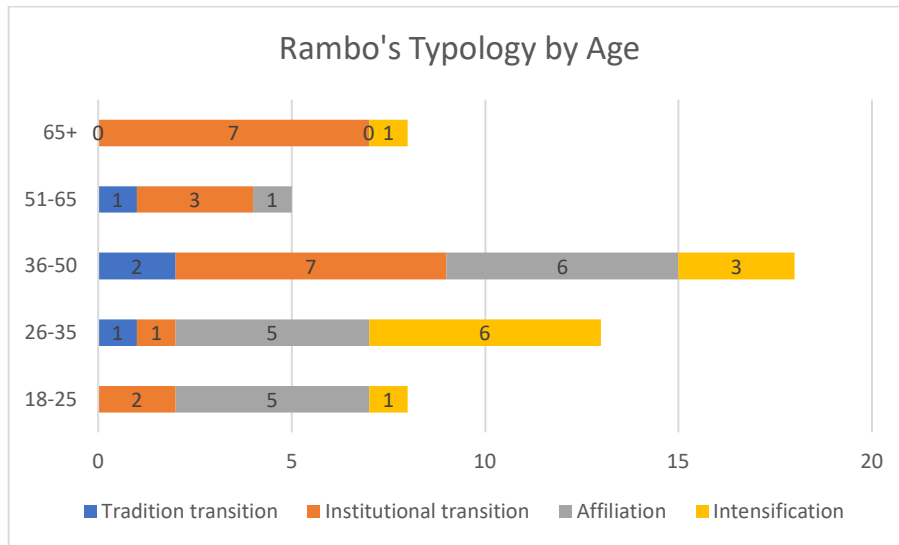


Figure 12: Rambo's Typology by Age

As seen in Figure 11, respondents classified under 'Intensification' comprised mainly Black respondents, whilst those engaged in 'Institutional transition' comprised a majority of White respondents. The largest numbers of people moving from other Christian denominations ('Institutional Transition') were observed in age groups 36-50, 51-65 and 65+years. Respondents most likely to be classified under the category 'Affiliation', tended to belong to the younger age groups 18-25, 26-35 and 36-50years (Figure 12). A large number can be observed in the two youngest age groups, which aligns with recent findings that two thirds of young Britons have no religious affiliation and may indicate that once young people do decide to convert, they do so with vigour and a high degree of commitment. This raises interesting parallels with Yamane and Richardson's consideration of active and passive faith transformation and the value of intentional decision-making in religious transformation; this will be discussed in depth when considering the qualitative findings.

### 5.10 Conclusion: Demographic profile

This chapter has attempted to present a demographic profile of people who have decided to become Catholic in the Archdiocese of Southwark in 2018/19 and to offer an

initial, foundational analysis of the various types of conversions taking place by applying Rambo's contextual typology.

The findings reflect that there are more respondents who register as Candidates (those who have already been baptised) and have already been raised within another Christian denomination before converting to Catholicism. It was interesting to note that even those raised within a Catholic family could not ensure they would receive the sacraments of initiation, even with siblings having been baptised. 68% of respondents were women and the largest number of women was observed in the 36-50yr age group. The two largest age groups represented were 26-35 and 36-50 and in terms of ethnicity, there was a broadly equal number of Black African and White respondents who participated in the research. All Black respondents came from parishes in South-East and South West London, areas with high population density and unsurprisingly, these parishes also claimed the larger numbers of those coming forward to become Catholic in 2018/19. In terms of marital status, the two largest groups represented were married or single and yet, there was great variation in family structure across those who were married, single, separated and living with a partner.

Applying Rambo's typology, it was possible to see that the largest group belonged to the 'Institutional transition' category, who were equally split between male and female and predominantly White respondents, followed by the 'Affiliation' group and the 'Intensification' group who comprised a majority of Black respondents. The 'Tradition transition' group were the smallest category and were all female.

Rambo's typology was helpful in providing a preliminary contextual framework for the diverse spectrum of religious upbringing and experience which was evident amongst respondents. This framework was also helpful in being able to cite a preliminary

rationale for what had brought people to the point of finding out about the Catholic faith, to actively pursue faith in a formal setting. There was however, no way of being able to determine the pre-decision making context for people, the catalysts, factors or motivations which had brought them to this point. To meet people already involved in catechesis groups (albeit in the earliest stages) presupposes a series of significant occurrences which have already been profoundly instrumental in their spiritual journey. The qualitative interviews became the next, crucial step in being able to shine light on this early contextual stage: as one member of the Catholic clergy commented in response to a discussion of early findings, 'I don't know why we haven't looked at this before now'.

## **6 CHAPTER SIX: Why contemporary Britons become Catholic: exploring the earliest stages of spiritual awakening**

In the last chapter, I presented a demographic profile of 53 people seeking initiation into the Catholic faith in the Archdiocese of Southwark in 2018/19. Exploring factors such as gender, age, ethnicity and marital status in conjunction with Rambo's contextual typology enabled me to construct a preliminary picture of a contemporary British Catholic. The following three chapters seek to build and develop this initial portrait, adding layers of texture and nuance from the interviews, fieldwork and consultations conducted with those in the process of becoming Catholic and those journeying with them.

The qualitative findings comprise in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-two people in the process of becoming Catholic, five members of the clergy, five RCIA catechists and four follow-up interviews with first wave respondents. I propose to explore the qualitative data from two key perspectives: first, to apply Rambo's seven stage model as a way of capturing the richness and depth of the conversion experience through a process orientated approach. Secondly, I will be working with the conversion motifs as proposed by Lofland and Skonovd, looking at their occurrence and weight as they appear throughout the data and in this way, seek to raise their profile in a way that diverges from Rambo's model. By exploring the data from both a staged and typological perspective, I hope to provide a cogent re-presentation of Catholic conversion from a contemporary, British context.

The qualitative findings are considered sequentially within the framework of Rambo's model. Each stage will begin with a table of key factors; those which show the

strongest *resonance* with Rambo's framework are italicised, whilst new findings and areas of divergence are distinguished by text in bold. In this way I hope to be able to demonstrate the applicability and fit of Rambo's model within the qualitative data, augmenting key themes as they emerge.

This chapter begins by presenting the simple rationale given by respondents as a way of laying the groundwork, the essential foundations upon which the qualitative findings can be situated. Discussion will then explore the first three stages of Context, Crisis and Quest considering the conversion motifs as they begin to emerge in the data. Finally, this chapter culminates in the proposition of a new, branch conversion motif, 'Affective Synthesis', which I suggest is not fully encompassed in the original motifs proposed by Lofland and Skonovd, yet becomes illuminated when examined using the framework of Rambo's staged model.

## **6.1 Reasons given on demographic survey for becoming Catholic – Early Indicators**

When completing the demographic survey, respondents were given the opportunity to describe the reasons why they had decided to become Catholic and this provided texture and colour to the demographic data, enabling the presentation of a more complete profile for each person. Answers varied in length and detail as to why people had decided to become Catholic and comprised six major themes which will be discussed below, in order of frequency.

### **6.1.1 Answering a call**

By far the most frequently mentioned reason for wanting to become Catholic was in answer to some form of call to faith, whilst only one respondent said that they sought spiritual guidance. Most respondents in this category referred to a personal experience



of Catholicism as transmitted by a spouse and/or close family member, which led them in turn to consider their own spiritual life. In this category, respondents used phrases such as ‘I felt ready to start my own journey’, ‘I thought, it’s time for me’, whilst others used more explicit phrases to express this sense of being called,

‘I discerned a pull to Roman Catholicism that I needed to explore’ (White, male, 65+yrs).

‘The Holy Mother has called me, through the warnings of Fatima’. (Asian, female, 36-50 years)

### **6.1.2 Simple Desire**

The second most frequent reason given was expressed as simple desire to become Catholic and these were often the shortest entries. Answers naturally grouped into three categories: wanting to become part of the Catholic community, more specific intentions to receive sacramental initiation and lastly, the fulfilment of a desire which had been present over time and was now being realised, as highlighted through the following statements:

‘I wanted to be part of the big Catholic family’ (Black African, female, 26-35yrs)

‘All my life I have wanted to become Catholic and now I have my chance’  
(White, male, 26-35yrs)

‘Wanted to convert for quite a while and finally managed to attend the course’  
(White, female, 26-35yrs)

### **6.1.3 Completion of Sacraments of Initiation**

The third most frequently mentioned reason for attending classes was to complete the sacraments of initiation. In almost all statements, people said they wanted to become a ‘full’ Catholic and their statements highlighted themes of membership, identity and confidence in belonging, as represented through the following statements,

‘I did not get round to Confirmation, and I have always wanted to complete the final step’ (White, female, 17-25yrs)

‘I have been here before but would now like to become a full Catholic’ (Black African, female, 26-35yrs)

‘Because I want to be a complete and full Catholic member’ (Black African, female, 36-50yrs)

#### **6.1.4 Intensify and strengthen**

Statements in this category conveyed a sense of wanting to strengthen, formalise or consolidate a foundational knowledge of Catholicism. Answers fell into two major themes: first, people wanted to deepen their knowledge of Catholic doctrine in relation to understanding the distinction between Catholicism and other Christian denominations. Secondly, building doctrinal knowledge was linked with an appreciation of the heritage and tradition of the Catholic Church. Examples can be seen below:

‘I was born in an Anglican family but got married to a Catholic. Hence participating in the RCIA will help me understand more why certain practises are observed in Catholic doctrine’ (Black African, female, 36-50yrs)

‘I just want to learn more about the Catholic Church, the oldest church in the world’ (Black African, female, 26-35years)

‘To study the Holy Trinity, Catholicism is the oldest Church’ (Black African, male, 65+years)

A small number of comments related to strengthening an existing understanding and relationship with God, using theological phrasing and terminology to express rationale, as seen below:

‘To have a confirmation with God. To cleanse away the sins committed by Adam and Eve’ (Black African, female, 17-25yrs)

‘To meet Jesus in His church.’ (Black African, male, 65+yrs)

‘I really want to know what it is to worship God in truth.’ (Black African, female, 17-25yrs)

The responses given above provided an additional contextual layer for the reasons why people become Catholic but represented a snapshot of reasoning and rationale formulated at the point of formal encounter with the church, when the initial decision-making process was already underway. Consideration now moves to explore the factors undergirding the early, pre-decision-making phase of spiritual awakening, viewed through the lens of Rambo’s first stage of Context.

## 6.2 Stage One - Context

Macro context
• Systems of access & control
Micro context
• Degree of integration and conflict
Contours of Context
• <i>Culture</i>
• <b>Cultural Christianity</b>
• <i>Social Milieu: Secularisation</i>
• <b>What does it mean to be a ‘None’?</b>
• Personal
• <i>Religious sphere</i>
• <b>Early adolescence – gateway religious experience</b>
Valence of dimension
Contextual Influences
• Resistance and rejection
• Enclaves
• Paths of conversion
• Congruence
• Types of conversion
Tradition transition
Institutional transition
Affiliation
Intensification
Apostasy
• Motifs of conversion
Intellectual
Mystical
Experimental
<i>Affectional</i>
• <b>Affective Synthesis – connecting the spiritual journey past and present.</b>
Revivalism
Coercive

Normative: Proscriptions and prescriptions
Key: <i>Areas of resonance – italicised</i> <b>Areas of divergence – bold.</b>

Figure 13: Stage One 'Context'

Rambo begins his seven-stage model of conversion with Context because he sees this as the cornerstone upon which all other conditions, factors, processes in the conversion journey are layered (1993:20-43). He asserts that Context is not one distinct stage which can be passed through in linear progression, but rather one that can be returned to frequently along all stages of spiritual transformation. Rambo defines macro context as the total environment, political, economic, religious and social systems, whilst micro contexts relate to the world of the individual, encompassing the influence of friends and family, ethnicity, community and background. For Rambo, understanding the role that micro contexts play in people's lives is crucial since he identifies that they have the potential to neutralise the broader, societal forces at work. Recent research in the US undergirds the impact that the religious character of geographical areas and places can have on individuals and communities; that local subcultures have the vast potential to shape a range of behaviours, perceptions and values such as generalised trust (Marshall and Olsen 2018).

This is perhaps, the sort of game changing approach which undergirds this research, to understand the microforces at work in people's lives which disconfirm the cultural trends around them. He asserts, 'Contextual factors shape avenues of communication, the range of religious options available, and people's mobility, flexibility, resources, and opportunities' (Rambo 1983:21).

Treating this as a preliminary phase of motivational influences, the data revealed specific 'contours of context' to be particularly strong for people, focused around

cultural, social and religious factors at the heart of early spiritual awakening. Key themes related to the socio-cultural forces of secularisation, the religious sphere of context and within this area, the role of personal relationships both past and present.

### **6.2.1 Contours of Context: Social Milieu and Context**

### **6.2.2 Secularisation**

Whilst the interviews did not explicitly ask respondents about their opinions of the broader religious culture, conversations frequently touched on issues surrounding the current religious climate. Overall, younger respondents spoke more broadly about specific experiences of secularisation in relation to reactions of family, friends and peers, whilst respondents in the age groups 35-51 years and 65 years and above, offered comment about wider socio-cultural issues.

People in this group displayed a keen appreciation of the current patterns of religious decline in Britain, understanding that secularisation had caused a broad questioning of the point of faith, and a reluctance to ascribe or identify to once traditional structures or institutions (Bruce & Voas 2019:21; Bullivant 2015:11-13). Respondents recognised that whilst religious decline was cause for significant concern, disengagement from established structures and institutions was a recurring theme across society generally, a finding echoed by those exploring the wider cultural narrative (Berger 1967:47; Woodhead 2016:260).

A small number of respondents expressed negative perceptions of the increasingly secularised culture, affirming instead the redemptive potential of faith. This was an interesting finding in the light of Bruce's emphasis of the public perception of religion as dangerous (2015:15); one female respondent suggested that it was precisely the lack of faith which renders society empty and vulnerable to evil forces. In the following

quotation, she alludes directly to the subsumption of Christian values by secular modern culture,

‘we are at the 'end of times' and today’s society is numbing us to the real truth which is faith.’ (Asian, female, 36-50yrs).

It is possible to detect some resonance with Berger’s assertion that people become open to a new religious option through induction; motivated through a deep, inherent respect for human experience and religious tradition, faith is filled with potential for building a new worldview which is plausible, and which presents a way of living and being in community. Both Berger and Rambo perceive this view to be particularly relevant for a contemporary audience. (Rambo 1993:29; Berger 1967&1980).

For this small number of respondents, discussion around the loss of central human values saw an interesting connection with the gateway potential for religion to improve public receptivity by focusing on the benefits it can confer, thus filling an important cultural gap. A member of the clergy suggested that in and of itself, the process of secularisation had levelled the playing field upon which contemporary Catholicism now operates, thereby providing new areas of potential growth. In particular, he speaks about the opportunity to become Catholic within the Ordinariate (the Anglican Patrimony),

one of the benefits of the secularization (and there aren’t many), I think is that it has killed off a lot of the sectarianism that still hung around our parent's generation a little bit. So I think the whole stigma of becoming Catholic is not what it once was... a lot of people I speak to, [for whom] being Catholic was something foreign, it wasn't for them, but when they realised they could become Catholic, I think they were interested, they were intrigued (White, clergy, 36-50yrs).

In a pluralist society in which religion must compete in a crowded marketplace, the respondents in this research had been influenced by, what they saw as, value-based deficiencies in modern culture as a result of declining faith. This finding speaks to

broad themes in the literature around the search for meaning in modern culture (Fowler 1984:57; Berger 1967:47-66; Smith 2003:64; Day 2013:193), the place of religion in offering higher ideals and the weighing up of the potential benefits religion can offer. (Barker 1984:238; Gartrell & Shannon 1985:37) For these respondents, after careful re-evaluation, intentional choices were made based on the value-based benefits discovered in traditional Catholicism and this is a strong theme asserted in the work of Yamane (2014) and Richardson (1985).

### **6.2.3 What does it mean to be a 'None'?**

The research revealed a fascinating insight into what it means to be a 'None' in a culture with a declining Christian heritage and to consider what formative experiences remain in the consciousness of people who say they were raised with no religion. Of additional significance were the categories of self-identification used by respondents and their own interpretation of what it means to be religious or not in modern culture.

Of the nine respondents who self-identified as 'Nones' or 'irreligious', three were aged between 18-25years and classified their ethnicity as White British. In describing their upbringing, a strong theme arose of childhood exposure to Christianity without engagement, perceived in terms of a 'going through the motions' type approach to faith and of a religious practice which was purely cultural. For one young mother, her assessment of religious practice as a child displays a keen awareness of the distinction between nominal religious practice and authentic belief. She explained,

I've just been brought up in the Church of England but was not very religious, never went to church or anything....back in school then we still did prayers and hymns and things like that. But never... my family were never religious. Um, never celebrated. We'd celebrate Easter and Christmas, but that was it. Never anything that counted as religious (White, female,18-25yrs).

Even against a backdrop of religious practice at school and pinnacle moments of the Christian calendar, this gives an important indicator that for the 'Nones', attending church services once or twice a year, although culturally significant, does not translate into a personal religious practice or identity. The remaining two respondents in this younger age bracket, echoed Helen's childhood experience of a skeleton Christian practice followed by their parents, but for whom faith was never transferred at home. This resonates with research demonstrating the impact of parental faith practice on children's adherence later in life and the ability for children to detect and differentiate between deeply held and residual belief (Heinrich 2009:255). This findings also draws on Hout's research highlighting the liminal status of people raised Protestant or Catholic, who claim no religious identity but retain a fluidity regarding their religious status (Hout 2017).

The following quotation goes one step further to highlight that for many young people, not only is faith not transmitted beyond school and occasional church attendance but is not even discussed within family units. This was borne out for several respondents in this category who did not know the religious identity of their parents until much later in life. This young student summarised his parents' religious affiliation,

Well my dad I think is sort of, he's probably an atheist. Yeah. So, he doesn't really believe in in God. And my mum, I think she does but she seems to be more like, sort of culturally belongs to the Church of England, like she does go to church at Christmas and Easter but I mean, I haven't really spoken to her that much about it, but she doesn't go to church every week, you know? (White, male, 18-25yrs).

This finding was significant in revealing that within the categories of religious self-identifiers, there was a fairly broad spectrum of religious experience which was not effectively captured by terms such as 'Nones'. In this sense, it was possible to echo Woodhead's assertion that such labels or terms are not always effective and serve as



‘dustbin categories’ which can be limited and not always well received (Woodhead 2016).

#### **6.2.4 Religious sphere of Context**

Rambo suggests that people take their cues from a matrix of religious factors which operate in society and the findings from this research concurred that religious experience prior to conversion was a major contextual influence for those on the journey to become Catholic (1993:32). Key themes emerged from the interviews relating to upbringing, childhood memories and adolescent spiritual exploration. The impact of personal relationships both past and present was monumental in terms of providing formative experience and embedding faith in early childhood which became an important connective in later life.

Respondents were pragmatic in recounting their primary experiences of religion, both positive and negative; whilst their accounts were often highly emotionally charged, they provided an overview of factors which explained why they had chosen to pursue faith at this particular stage of adulthood. More to it, their experiential accounts stood as important markers to demonstrate the various ways in which faith can be either encouraged or stifled at key life stages (Fowler 1984:61; Weddell 2012:)

In contrast with people raised in families where Christian belief was nominal, thirteen respondents recalled formative childhood experiences of being raised in other Christian denominations; seven Anglican, two Pentecostal, two Methodist, one Russian Orthodox and one failed to specify. For these people, strong themes of obligation and duty emerged from the interviews, with an implication that faith had been imposed rather than transmitted. People in this group had often experienced more than one Christian denomination throughout their childhood and this raised serious issues around choice

regarding religious identity. The following respondent expressed feelings of irritation bordering on anger when reflecting on his early religious experiences,

Um, we came from quite a strict religious upbringing. My parents were Methodists...we attended a C of E church and then went back to Methodism when I was aged 8, with the expectation that we'd go to church every Sunday. I think, uh, as a teenager you weren't given an option and that therefore started barriers coming up (White, male, 35-50yrs).

A female respondent who became Catholic in her late seventies, described a continuing trend of oscillating between different Christian denominations throughout her childhood, which quite clearly conflicted with an enduring personal desire to become Catholic. She explained,

Well I was baptised Anglican, my mother was a non-conformist and so I had to start off as a Methodist and then I went back to the Anglican church... I had always wanted to be Roman Catholic, right from when I was a dot and I've never been happy where I was.' (White, female, 65+yrs).

For both respondents, the frequency of religious change as children seemed to have two important effects. First, early feelings of confusion were recalled around their own feelings of religious identity, manifesting as anger for John, and for Maureen, persistent feelings of not being in the 'right place' throughout her adult life. Secondly, the choice to explore Catholicism seemed a more fluid, natural possibility since it was congruous with childhood experience. This finding concurs with recent research demonstrating that switching religions takes place more easily with those who have prior evidence to support opportunities for religious change; this was particularly evident in light of the consistently high numbers of people involved in denominational change and the extensive degree of religious mobility (Stark & Glock 1968; Roof & McKinney 1987).

Having seen that fluctuating childhood experience of denominational change could enable people to be more open and receptive to faith in later life, it was significant to

find that overtly negative experiences could also serve as a driver for conversion. Typically, such accounts of negative experiences were recounted as stage-setting type narratives and were often highly charged with emotion.

A young female student who had decided to become Catholic after meeting her fiancée at university, described her upbringing in the Russian Orthodox Church. She recalled that in Russia, as a legacy of historical antagonism toward religions of all kind, there was a common, negative perception that religious people were fanatics and as such, were viewed with deep suspicion and mistrust. Religious practice was actively discouraged and when her father discovered her reading the Old Testament as a child, the Bible was removed and hidden, to stifle any further religious enquiry. Memories of her early childhood interest in the Bible and her father's reaction led to feelings of frustration, anxiety and confusion. She explained,

when I was little, [my father] was taking [the Bible] away and hiding it from me. I was trying to find it and read it again because it was really...interesting, particularly the stories of the Old Testament. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

Rather than suppressing spiritual enquiry, this young woman's experience of having choice and freedom removed at such a young age served to fuel her later quest for faith at university.

### **6.2.5 Early adolescence – gateway religious experience**

Accounts of religious experience in early adulthood emphasised the sense of spiritual fragility at this key life stage; early questioning and spiritual awakening will often lead young adults to active exploration and a sense of responsibility, choice and volition in relation to their faith journey. Religion is frequently explored by young adults in an attempt to rationalise the inherited faith of their parents and of the prevailing culture.

Recent research is beginning to emerge which explores the remaining spirituality and desire for religious experience from young adults and which challenges the binary understanding of the term 'spiritual but not religious' (Herzog, P 2021; Clydesdale and Garces-Foley 2019).

In their work exploring the religious identity and practices of young Catholic adults, Hornsby-Smith and Lee revealed a subset of lively and deeply committed young adults, for whom Christianity was a driving force in their lives. Whilst recognising the declining numbers of young people adhering to traditional Catholicism, they observed the following socio-religious shift,

'..there are also signs of fitness in that it is developing a significant and strong core of committed, mainly progressive activists'. (1979:179)

As revealed by Fowler and Weddell, faith exploration in early adulthood can provide a springboard upon which a new religious journey can begin (Weddell 2012:128; Fowler 1984:59-62). Equally, without a solid framework of support at this crucial stage, questions go unanswered, judgements are formed and barriers erected, all of which have the potential to neuter spiritual development.

Two respondents who had become interested in Christianity in their teens, describe an extensive programme of discovery of Scripture and active community engagement, as a means of experimenting or 'trying out' the new religious option. These findings concur with Bromley and Shupe's role model theory (1979), in which, people are able to see themselves 'but better' within the framework of the new religious option (Lofland & Skonovd 1981). An Anglican respondent who had become Catholic in her forties, recalled her first concrete religious experience as a teenager,

I am a convert to Christianity and came to it through a Christian Union camp, so my family were not regular churchgoers at all and so I became Christian at age 16yrs and from a very early age, I'd read the whole Bible by age 16yrs, so I was quite serious about faith and I was in evangelical churches for quite a while and then I dipped a little bit in my twenties (White, female, 36-51yrs)

For these respondents, the absence of a credible community or social network to provide a supportive, spiritual community with credible role models at this crucial stage of faith development, caused their once vibrant faith to weaken to a point where it could no longer survive amongst the competing pressures of contemporary life (Berger 1967; Bruce 2014:16; Everton 2018). As Fowler contends, spiritual awakening is often present in early adulthood without formal commitment and is by its very nature fragile and tenuous, the chance for growth and rejection are equally possible routes along the spiritual pathway at this stage (1984).

For Peter, a young man who had discovered the message of Jesus privately, it was entering the workforce in a competitive IT environment, which caused a fracture between the competitive, money focused value system he found in the city and those embedded in the Gospels.

I wasn't Christian. I had an encounter with Jesus in my teens.... I was reading the new Testament - Romans and I felt that Jesus was..just like....wow, this makes so much sense. This was in my teens. Then I kind of slipped (White, male, 36-51yrs)

These interviews revealed that for many people, when religious fervour is quashed or stifled in early adolescence, the experience remains in the psyche as an open loop, a journey interrupted and unresolved. Whilst there may be residual negativity surrounding early religious experiences, the findings suggest their potential to lay religious foundations which signposts towards potential opportunities for revitalisation at a later stage. The specific emphasis on faith development in adolescence concurs with Weddell's five thresholds, which have the potential to be developed but can remain

fragile without nurturing support (2012:194-195). There are strong links with Fowler's Synthetic-Conventional Faith, characterised in young adulthood, as a key period of early identity formation and emerging self-hood. Since Fowler contends that this stage is often a key spark point for faith, when the young adult search for meaning becomes embedded in their own life story, self-awareness and emerging identity (1984:61)

#### **6.2.6 Relationships within the religious sphere.**

The findings revealed that by far the most influential factor in providing religious context for people were found in their relationships with others, reinforcing the literature exploring the crucial role that inter-personal bonds and attachments play in religiosity (Lofland & Starke 1965; Lofland & Skonovd 1981; Starke & Finke 2000:117; Bruce 2014:15). Both conscious and subconscious messages about faith and the place of religion in life are transmitted through family members, friends and acquaintances.

The influence of family members and interactions with friends and acquaintances in the past tended to have two important consequences. First, direct experiences that were explicitly negative in effect, suppressed any potential engagement in Catholicism for a number years. Secondly, for people with powerful memories of Catholicism transmitted along generational lines, experiences, memories and reminiscences forged a powerful connective link and spiritual anchor around which people could frame their own religious journey in later life.

Two respondents provided illuminating dialogues signposting the legacy of sectarian perspectives of Catholicism and the process of unpicking outdated assumptions, memories and perceptions retained by family or friends. An elderly Anglican respondent recalled powerful memories of widespread disapproval within his family

when his sister announced she was to marry a Catholic during the 1960's. He had also been particularly influenced by the views of his late first wife, who due to bad experiences of Catholicism, had made him promise on her deathbed never to become Catholic.

During the interview he recounted stories told by his wife of heated exchanges with the local Catholic priest who regularly appropriated the families' rent money for the 'use of the Church'. He recalled one such visit,

her mother was a Conservative voting Anglican and her father a labour voting Roman and the Roman priest came round and said, 'look unless your children are baptised into the Church of Rome, they will go to Purgatory (White, male, 65 years)

A lady in her early fifties who had no experience of religious practice or belief, described a similarly distressing comment which was made to her as a young mother some thirty years before and which severed her relationship with religion. She described her experience,

when my children were younger, there was a church group that they decided to run [alongside] the mother and toddler group...um, for mothers wanting to find out more about the Bible. And that was something I was really interested in even back then. So I went, but the opening session was.... well, the gist was, just by virtue of being born, you've committed original sin and I thought 'this isn't for me. So I, I didn't go back' (White, female respondent 51-65years)

Both accounts were described neutrally, with a recognition of time passing and situations changing. Tom's rationalisation of having now entered the path to become Catholic acknowledged that the judgements and perceptions he had inherited from his wife were indeed second-hand and ceased to provide an accurate contemporary depiction of what it meant to be Catholic in modern culture. He explained,

it was over 75 years ago when that remark was made....but I mean the Catholic Church now is not what it was in her day and circumstances change..... I mean, those rational people change their minds. (White, male, 65+yrs)

Reflection on past experiences emphasised an ability displayed by many respondents to separate historical perceptions of the church as institution from their own respective spiritual journeys and this was a consistent finding across all age groups. This was especially evident when respondents were asked about the response from family and friends to their decision to become Catholic. Despite the relatively recent coverage of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court case investigating the child abuse scandal in the Catholic church, one only mention was made in the research interviews regarding this issue. As will be discussed later in greater depth, this finding highlights the way in which most respondents could effectively compartmentalise their own religious journey from the wider institutional narrative of the church and could do the same with the views and perceptions of family and friends.

For these respondents, the process of clearing away of redundant attitudes and perceptions paved the way for a new sense of receptivity. Whilst Lofland and Stark recognise the phase of receptivity towards the new religious option and build into their seven stage 'funnel' approach to religious change (1965), the sense of openness to Catholicism in the light of past contextual narratives, echoes more strongly with Fowler's Conjunctive phase of faith development. Within this phase, Fowler describes a mindset shift toward 'postcritical receptivity', in which people engage in the process of re-evaluation, displaying an open attitude to new traditions and communities, mixed with a readiness to embrace deep and active commitment (1984:62).

#### **6.2.7 The Affectional Motif – the importance of positive affective bonds in conversion**

The development and cultivation of positive relationships and interconnecting bonds with others, has traditionally played a significant role in the transmission of faith and



the spread of religious movements (Lofland & Starke 1965:862-875; Stark 1996; Rambo 1983:38, 2014; Crossley 2007:143, Everton 2018:35; Bruce 2014:15). Relatedly, recent research has also highlighted the importance of the denominational composition of geographic areas in affecting individuals willingness to trust others and build significant relationships with others (Marshall and Olsen 2018).

Contextually, the role of family and friends was cited by thirteen respondents as being instrumental in laying the foundations for their own religious journeys. The majority of respondents in this category were aged 36-50years, with four aged 26-35 years. For people in this group, observation of active religious practice in family and friends provided a re-presentation of Catholicism which dispelled prior misconceptions or judgements and offered new perspectives regarding dogma and church teaching. Within this group, seven people said that the influence of a close partner played a pivotal role in their faith journey by introducing them to Catholic belief and practice via their own engagement in catechesis or adult formation.

Two young female respondents with minimal religious upbringing, described how they were introduced to Catholic Mass because of a new relationship. Having been raised Russian Orthodox, in which faith was practised privately and devotion heavily restricted, the contrast of attending Mass within a large Catholic family unit was particularly influential for Anne. She described the emotional impact of attending Mass as a newcomer,

So when I was with him, I was going to Mass with his family...So whenever I would be in England I would go to Mass with them every week. And uh, it was just a really nice feeling to be in the Mass with people because you know, like the responses, you say them all together ... It feels like we're all together, we're all doing something together (White, female, 18-25yrs)

This account neatly demonstrates the power of joining a new network of relationships in which the sense of community and belonging is particularly strong. Helen, a young teaching assistant who had recently had her first child, eloquently described her journey to become Catholic as the culmination of several contextual life stages coming together,

Um, and then in 2011 I met my partner and my son's father, his family are Catholic, he's Catholic and they're Irish Catholics. And then in 2012, I joined...the Catholic school, um, as a teaching assistant. So yeah, it kind of all came together there really (White, female, 18-25yrs).

Both young women were at key transitional life stages when Catholicism was introduced, the cultivation of a new relationship and the birth of a child. The positive associations with these events were reinforced by the support of new social networks, both familial and religious which also conveyed a strong sense of belonging within the new religious pathway. These findings echo the work of Smith, Englelke and Day in their assertions that finding a new community or 'tribe' can play a key role in establishing feelings of belonging (Smith 2003; Day 2013:193, Engelke 2017:185).

#### **6.2.8 Affective Synthesis – connecting the spiritual journey past and present.**

Whilst the impact of current relationships and positive affective bonds were found to lay key contextual foundations for those interviewed, the findings also revealed a significant link to the powerful affective content of relationships, memories and reminiscence in the past. This finding was acute in the 'Nones' and those with minimal religious upbringing.

Robin began his interview by asserting that he had been raised with no religious upbringing. During the interview he recalled enduring memories during early childhood of attending Catholic Mass with his grandparents, themselves devout Catholics. He explained,

when I was younger I was scared of the Catholic church, because it was a scary place, you know?.....There was a white, Irish priest who was very old fashioned and I found Mass quite boring I suppose because I didn't really understand the rituals and the service. (White, male, 18-25yrs)

Although Robin was the only member of his family not to be baptised, positive, loving memories relating to his grandparents were sufficiently influential to reorder and re-evaluate his early perceptions of faith, thereby neutralising their negative effect. He explained,

my mum or dad, they don't go to church..., so my nan has always been like my second mum, I'm really close to my nan and grandad, they've always been there for me.... So I used to go to church with my nan, maybe when I used to stay for the weekends, I used to go to **this** church. (White, male, 18-25yrs)

As the interviews progressed, it became common amongst the 'Nones' aged 35yrs and over, for memories to emerge of religious experiences as a child, which were linked to close family members and which held deep connections at the point of reflection. A very interesting example was illuminated by Max who seemed initially to have had the least religious exposure of all research participants. He began by explaining,

[I had] no religious experience at all, in fact my mum and dad were of the ilk that Church or faith, well it's a bit embarrassing, 'why are they doing that?' they'd say. It's not their fault but because of the way they were brought up, they don't understand or want to understand (White, male, 35-51 years)

Whilst Max's newly awakened faith in Catholicism had been introduced to him by his Catholic fiancée, towards the end of the interview he recounted some profound childhood experiences relating to his grandmother, which seemed to have lain dormant for much of his adult life. He spoke fondly about his grandmother who was a devout Catholic, would attend Mass daily and was a model of strong religious faith for him during his own spiritual development. He reminisced,

My nan was my hero (sorry I'm getting emotional), she was so loving and warm and caring, my mum and dad were against my nan being a Catholic Christian ...

my nan, who looked after me as a child, she would always teach me to look at the church crosses and to this day, if I'm feeling down, I always look up (White, male, 35-51 years)

For the 'Nones', discovery of strong faith in a family member often possessed strong affective content which became heightened after their death, allowing a strong, positive connection to be forged. Lydia only discovered that her mother had been a Catholic after she had died. She found this revelation shocking since they had enjoyed an extremely close relationship in life and yet had rarely spoken about religion or faith. In coming to terms with this disturbing posthumous revelation, Lydia recalled childhood memories of family holidays to visit her cousins in Ireland. She describes early feelings of confusion when attending Catholic Mass,

I remember going to mass with them one time and when they went up to take, you know, Holy Communion, I just thought, 'I'm not being left behind'. So I went up with them and then when I got home I got a roasting for taking Communion and not having been baptised nor confirmed into the Catholic Church. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

This reminiscence demonstrates the profound significance of exposure to religion in childhood, especially linked to memories with a strong emotional content. For the 'Nones', it was usual for interviews to begin with strong affirmations about their lack of religious exposure and lack of formal affiliation but would frequently move to reveal a surprisingly rich internal store of memories, connections and relationships about early religious experiences which had been buried over time but which served as powerful spiritual anchors upon which new religious experience could be positioned.

Mark was also introduced to Catholicism by his partner, who had begun attending RCIA as a way of strengthening her faith in anticipation of becoming godmother to her niece. After entering into theological discussions with his partner, Mark began to reflect deeply on his late mother's spiritual journey. Mark recounted a conversation

with his mother just before she died, at 80 years of age and who had decided to ‘return’ to the church having lapsed for many years. On her deathbed, Mark’s mother asked that he consider becoming Catholic, which became reality after meeting his partner many years later. For Mark, the connection between his late mother’s conversion and his own, laid key contextual foundations upon which he could position his own faith development and through which he found validation and meaning.

Against a backdrop of a fragmentary awareness of Christianity and a patchy appreciation of religious practice, interviews with the ‘Nones’ revealed the generational impact of religious decline.

### **6.2.9 Conclusion: Stage One ‘Context’**

Stage One of Rambo’s model provided the framework for a comprehensive exposition of micro-context and its potential for laying the basic groundwork for spiritual awakening. The findings provided a unique insight into what it means to be a ‘None’ in contemporary British culture. People in this group displayed a keen awareness that cultural Christianity does not automatically translate to deeply embedded belief and that parental model of religious practice alone is insufficient to transmit faith to children (Heinrich 2009:255; Benoit 2018). Evidence of generational gaps in faith transmission meant that key memories and reminiscences of significant family members who were devoutly religious carried a great deal of weight in making connections with a new religious pathway (Bruce 2014:16; Dreher 2017:122-127). In this way memory served as an important spiritual anchor.

The presence of the Affectional motif was present and visible in this first, contextual phase of Rambo’s model and reinforced the key role that relationships play in people’s lives when evaluating a new religious option. Interpersonal relationships were found to

be significant in laying the foundations for the new religious pathway, conveyed through observed behaviours and practices and reinforced by supportive religious networks of family and friends. The impact of deeply held faith of family members was important for two reasons; first, that they were responsible for sparking faith and thus placing an early marker for the establishment of religious identity and secondly, they served as a powerful influence when synthesised with other affective content (such as memories, emotional response and experience). This finding presented an interesting and significant divergence from affective motif in its simplest form and supported the formation of a new branch motif, Affective Synthesis.

Rambo positions the conversion motifs as one of the key contextual influences in this first and largest stage in the process of religious transformation. Given the importance of the conversion motifs afforded by Rambo, I was surprised to find their influence confined solely to Stage One. This observation became especially heightened as the interviews progressed, since the visibility of distinctive motif experiences became increasingly apparent at different stages of the conversion process and to varying degrees. Consideration of the progression and development of these motifs will be further explored in Rambo's second stage, 'Crisis' as disorientation' which seeks to understand the triggers which spark the first delicate spiritual embers.

### 6.3 Stage Two: 'Crisis' as disorientation

<p><i>Nature of Crisis</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Intensity</i></li><li>• Duration</li><li>• Scope</li><li>• Source: internal/external</li></ul> <p>Catalysts for conversion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Mystical experiences</i></li><li>• <b>Crisis of meaning</b></li><li>• Near-death experience</li><li>• <i>Illness &amp; death</i>, healing</li><li>• <b>Deficiency</b></li><li>• <i>Protean Selfhood</i></li><li>• <b>Crisis of faith identity</b></li><li>• <i>Is that all there is?</i></li><li>• <b>Fulfilment &amp; Desire for transcendence</b></li><li>• <b>Early attraction to Catholicism</b></li><li>• Altered states of consciousness.</li><li>• Pathology</li><li>• Apostasy</li><li>• Externally stimulated crises</li></ul> <p><b>Key:</b> <i>Areas of resonance – italicised</i> <b>Areas of divergence – bold.</b></p>
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Figure 14: Stage Two 'Crisis'

#### 6.3.1 Nature of Crisis

Rambo introduces his second stage by recognising the widely held assertion by scholars that religious conversion occurs in response to crisis (Lofland & Stark 1965:373; Stark 1996:31; Crossley 2006:143). On initial encounter, the term 'crisis' seemed overly dramatic and thus restrictive. Whilst it was possible to recall a small number of people for whom a personal crisis or traumatic event had led them to church, for many, the spiritual journey was less dramatic and often more obscure. Rambo asserts however that whilst crisis can indeed refer to a dramatic, life altering event, it can also refer to a gentler, internal shift which may or may not be evident to those around (1983:46). Crisis therefore can also be taken to mean a sense of disorientation, a breaking of internally held perspectives which lead an individual to change the course of their life to accommodate the newly acquired view.

Rambo suggests that the disorientation which occurs in response to crisis can exist within a continuum of diverse experiences and vary in content, duration and scope. He asserts that crisis can occur in two main ways, the first relates to an experience which causes a re-evaluation of life's trajectory and meaning, and could occur as a result of social disintegration, political oppression or a personal crisis event. The second relates to a more cumulative layering of factors, observations, attitudes which are subject to an event which effectively acts as the straw that breaks the camel's back.

In the second condition, there may be various seemingly 'insignificant' triggers which can only be appreciated as crisis in retrospect. The catalysts for crisis as categorised by Rambo include mystical experiences such as the conversion of St Paul on the road to Damascus, near death experiences and the impact of illness or healing, relating specifically to the individual rather than the experience of others. The internal questioning of 'is this all there is?' which seems to underline what many would label mid-life crisis, acts as a catalyst for individuals who have become disillusioned with life and the internal disorientation sparks a new search for meaning. The desire for transcendence is linked in a more positive way and relates to an internal drive within the individual to reach beyond themselves in the quest for meaning and purpose.

Drawing on the psychological insights of Lifton, Rambo cites Protean selfhood as a trigger for religious change (1993:51); this model asserts that the sense of the self is malleable and that religious transformation offers a stable core for the individual and a refuge from social chaos. In this model, the individual seeks out religion as a way of providing a secure foundation in life, which may otherwise be missing. Through a psychological lens, Rambo asserts the significance of pathology as a way of describing why certain individuals are driven to find faith. In this approach, the impact of fear, desperation or loneliness causes a sense of deficiency in the individual and religious



transformation serves as an 'adaptive mechanism' as a way of resolving inner psychological conflict. Apostasy, the rejection of one religious system for another is characterised by Rambo as a trigger for religious change and finally he cites externally stimulated crises, such as social or political degradation which occur at a national level, thereby causing a sense of broader instability and uncertainty.

### **6.3.2 Mystical**

Three respondents cited a mystical experience as the catalyst for their journey to Catholicism. A member of the clergy recalled the moment of spiritual disorientation he experienced which would become the catalyst for his own journey of religious transformation,

the day before I was made an Anglican deacon, I had just finished reading Newman's Apologia pro ...and I closed the book and said, 'bugger, I think I'm in the wrong Church', it wasn't a gradual thing, it hit me with force (Clergy, 36-50yrs)

This respondent described his experience as being highly emotive, sudden and life-altering, which was immediately consistent with the characteristic qualities of this motif as outlined by Lofland and Skonovd (1981:378). The remaining two respondents' experiences were less consistent with the patterning of the Mystical motif and its major variations.

Callum's mystical experience set him on a path of spiritual exploration, which would take place gradually, over several years, solidifying at university. He described the following experience,

I kind of had a sort of very profound religious experience one day and it was almost as if I felt the voice of God the Father talking to me. That's what it felt like to me and I'm still kind of a work in progress when I try to put it into words...I kind of felt something deeper than me saying, you know.... calling me to something better. I would say (male, 18-25yrs).

When asked whether he considered his religious transformation to be gradual or sudden, Tristan a former Anglican, reflected on the precise moment when he became fully aware of God's love for him,

I do have a moment of conversion experience, which was reading Luke 15, The Prodigal Son, and suddenly having that great conviction that that love was available to me too, so I can chart that to... a specific moment when I felt for the first time a really tangible sense of the love of God for me, as expressed through the parable. So that set me going within the Evangelical wing of the Anglican church (male, 51-65yrs)

Tristan described himself as having a 'broad ecumenical sentiment' and never felt particularly denominational in his faith. Over the course of the following nine years, Tristan and his wife cultivated a broad network of relationships with Christians from all denominations and would especially enjoy visiting Taize, an ecumenical monastic community in Northern France, at which he was exposed to many different denominational perspectives, including Catholicism.

For both respondents, the mystical experience of hearing the voice of God and revelation of Scripture, although sudden, occurred within an already established journey of spiritual enquiry, as opposed to coming out of the blue. This concurs strongly with Bardy's assertion that sudden, mystical experiences are the exception rather than the rule and derive from a more deliberate process of self-reflection (quoted in Kling, 2014:605).

These findings confirmed that whilst there are parallels between the trigger points and the conversion motifs, not all accounts correspond to the quality of the motif experience overall. For two of the respondents in this group, it became clear that respondents' experiences were more predominantly social patterned, centred on the formation of new social networks and relational bonds and as such, were more characteristic of the Affectional rather than the Mystical motif. Whilst all had

experienced a mystical experience, it was the subsequent layering of influences from others which characterised their conversion accounts more acutely.

### **6.3.3 Crisis of meaning**

Two of the respondents who had reported Mystical experiences as a dominant factor reported additional trigger points which concurred with Rambo's assertion that conversion may be the result of a cumulation of key mechanisms. For Callum and the clergyman mentioned, both reported that Catholicism had presented for them a tangible solution to the crisis of meaning which had affected them deeply. Both people commented on the loss of key values which had affected secular society; in his role as a priest, John said he had observed a lack of clarity in people's lives as a by-product of a pluralist culture with an emphasis on choice and diversity. He suggested that this had caused generalised feelings of anxiety and dis-ease which could be served by the direction and focus that accompany authentic belief,

I think it's that clarity people are looking for, in a world that doesn't know what to believe in or why, in a world that's lost the Gospel, you know, in a world that's at sea, where there's a rebellion going on, even as to what it means to be man, what it means to be woman in that world. Confidence and clarity are desperately wanted and needed. (Clergy, 36-50yrs)

In his interview, Callum echoed the sentiment of confusion brought about by the blurring of traditional societal roles in modern culture. He spoke particularly of the changing roles and expectations for men and women and the loss of consonant values evident in the 'You do You' culture adopted by his peers at university. Callum said that he felt anxious due to a range of confusing questions over the future, whether he should marry and have children, his role within the family unit and he felt anxious as to how these plans would 'fit' in modern culture. He explained,

There is a huge crisis.... a lack of meaning in life..... And I think, Yeah, I think Christianity kind of gives life meaning, that, you know, is really I think difficult to find. It's difficult to find elsewhere (Male, 18-25yrs)

Within Callum's internal disorientation regarding future choices and direction for his life, Catholicism presented a plausible structure which made sense within the context of the prevailing culture. This was a particularly exciting emergent theme, since it resonated strongly with the literature asserting that human beings are driven to find meaning when the culture fails to reflect the values systems which inform personal identity and fuels a 'spirituality of seeking' (Weber 1965:117; Lonergan 1997:592; Woodhead 2016:260; Berger 1967; Day, 2013:193). Moreover there were strong links with Smith's work on subcultural identity theory, which contends that religion has the ability to thrive in a pluralist religious market place, when it builds a collective identity which helps people find consonant systems for meaning and belonging (Smith 2003:64; also see Everton, 2018:35).

#### **6.3.4 Illness and death**

None of the respondents interviewed mentioned personal illness as a motivating factor in their spiritual journey to become Catholic (see Rambo 1983:49-50), but rather had been affected by the illness and death of loved ones. For one Catholic female respondent whose faith had weakened, a 'turning point' came when her mother died and she lost her father soon after. Suffering extreme feelings of grief, she decided to return to her local Catholic church to seek the guidance of the parish priest. After receiving counsel from the priest, Amber said that returning to church for weekly Mass brought a sense of consistency and familiarity which helped to build a new foundation for her. As her faith deepened, she began to rekindle the connections with the faith of her childhood and adolescence, whilst helping her to deal with the grief over the loss of her parents. Her daughter was born during this time of personal challenge and disequilibrium and

reinforces Woodhead in her assertion that the church serves as a useful mechanism to mark and celebrate pivotal life events (2016).

Extreme feelings of grief following the death of her mother were cited by a female respondent called Lydia, as the sole reason for becoming Catholic. Lydia had no explicit religious upbringing, her only experiences of Catholicism were experienced as a child when she travelled to Ireland to visit family. Lydia had enjoyed an extremely close and loving relationship with her mother, but she could not recall any discussions between them about faith and she herself, had not been baptised.

Lydia was devastated when her mother was diagnosed with cancer and suffered a rapid decline; despite working as a palliative care nurse, the loss of her mother to cancer caused profound shock and debilitating grief and her own sense of personal crisis, stress and disorientation was palpable during the interview. For someone with no practical adult experience of Catholicism, Lydia felt overwhelmed at the task of arranging and organising her mother's funeral and uncomfortable at the prospect of even stepping foot inside a church. With the support of her mother's close friend (also Catholic), and the parish priest, Lydia recalled her mother's funeral Mass and the profound impact it had on her,

I remember just sitting there, I didn't even cry, everybody else was crying. I just sat there and I was just so absorbed in the mass and what was being said, um, and the meaning of it....what Father was saying in the prayers. And, kind of, the symbolism of it in a way. Um, and then after, you know, when everything had calmed down, I started coming into the church. I'd just sit for a few minutes and, um....but I never prayed, never prayed. I used to just sit and think about what had happened. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

The trigger point is expressed particularly well in Lydia's account; it was the illness and death of her mother which triggered internal crisis within her amidst profound grief and whilst she physically visited the church, belief was distant at this stage. There are

important connections to be drawn with the growth of the early church at times when the incidence of disease and death were high and people experienced extreme misery amid the chaos (Crossley 2006:143; Stark 1997:80; Stark & Finke 2000:39). At the time of writing (January 2021), the UK has plunged into a third national lockdown and it will be interesting in time, to explore whether the same potential for religious awakening is sparked through these events.

### **6.3.5 Deficiency**

A key factor which can lead to a sense of disorientation or crisis and which can propel people towards religious transformation, is that of deficiency, expressed as feelings of exclusion or being on the outside of things. Abebe explained that as he and his wife, who was Catholic and attending RCIA to strengthen her faith, had brought their children up as Catholics, he had experienced a sense of exclusion arising from the realisation that his whole family were Catholic except for him. In addition, he felt a growing sense of discomfort related to his own role in educating his own children. His feelings of exclusion as he expressed them also pointed towards a certain dissonance involved in the responsibility of passing on a faith to which one is not formally affiliated,

Bringing up my children in the faith, I gradually felt left out. I was reading Scripture and had a clear understanding of the 'undiluted Gospel' which taught selflessness and love towards the needy and the homeless. This was especially attractive to me but I knew in terms of raising them in a faith, that 'you can't give what you don't have' and I knew there was something missing for me (Black African, male, 36-50yrs)

The feeling of being an outsider was a particularly strong motivation for some people to formally pursue the path to becoming Catholic. Whilst Abebe expressed his enquiry phase as a gentle resolution to his own feelings of exclusion, for others the feeling of exclusion evoked feelings of frustration and occasionally anger. As headteacher of a

local secondary school, John explained that he had begun teaching some years before and accepted the expectation that staff would participate in the Catholic ethos of the school, regardless of their own personal religious beliefs. At the time of entering the school, John was not Catholic but struggled with the exclusion of non-Catholics in the liturgy and specifically the Eucharist,

the only thing that's of concern for me, I wasn't, um, able to take part in Communion. Um, and.. it grated on me a little bit because every time they had Mass, someone would get up and specifically say if you're Catholic then you can come and receive Communion and if you're not then by all means come up for a blessing but that didn't sit well with me and still doesn' (White, male, 51-65yrs)

John had a particularly strong pastoral perspective when discussing issues of faith and it was possible throughout the interview to hear the voices of his students and his own sensitivities to issues of exclusion, on justice and fairness. For John there was a strong sense of weighing up the range of positives effects that becoming Catholic would have on his emotional and spiritual wellbeing, in addition to his own feelings of responsibility as a teacher dispensing the teachings of the faith within a Catholic school. In both interviews, a strong sense of moral responsibility to others was a dominant factor in the decision to personally pursue Catholicism. Both accounts reflect a reflective, purposeful evaluation of the benefits of becoming Catholic and the consequential effects and as such, echo the literature on religious conversion in light of rational choice theory and benefit conferment (Bromley & Shupe 1979:170; Bruce 2014:13).

For Anne, who had been discouraged from pursuing her Russian Orthodox faith, her experience of attending Catholic Mass with her fiancé and his family gradually evoked feelings of being outside the group. Although this was not expressed in terms of exclusion, there was a stronger sense of frustration or impatience in not fully understanding the wider significance of the Catholic liturgy,

So the first year I was just going to mass and I was feeling frustrated that they don't know why do you do this bit here and why you say these words here and why things are done in this specific order and why. Sometimes it's the first eucharistic prayer, sometimes the third eucharistic prayer. It just didn't really make much sense. It was more like me following someone, but being blind because I had no idea about the background and why things are done in a certain way (White, female, 18-25yrs)

In many ways, Anne had been deeply affected by the feelings of community and belonging she experienced when attending Mass with her fiancée and his family and she desperately wanted to formalise her own Catholic identity as a way of unifying with the wider community. In many ways the findings reinforce the profound emotional response that can arise from the absence of community support, from feelings of being outside the group. For these respondents, the attraction of new relationships and strong supportive connections link resonate deeply with the existing literature on personal attachments and highlight the presence of the Affectional motif as a trigger for religious awakening (Stark & Bainbridge 1980:389; Lofland & Stark 1965:871; Lofland & Skonovd 1981:380).

### **6.3.6 Protean selfhood (James Fowler)**

For some respondents, the choice to explore Catholicism arose from a sequence of distressing or traumatic life events which had given rise to feelings of internal confusion and disorientation. Fowler asserts that the desire for religion arises from a need for equilibrium, when the Protean self is confronted with massive change or instability, 'Proteanism, then is a balancing act between responsive shape shifting, on the one hand, and efforts to consolidate and adhere on the other' (1984:9).

Robin, a young man in his twenties, had been raised in a family with little religious experience and revealed that he was the only child in his family not to be baptised. Robin displayed a peaceful, happy temperament when he arrived for his interview and was clearly enjoying his newfound religious identity. As the interview



progressed however, Robin spoke of several traumatic periods in his childhood and early adulthood which signalled an underlying turbulence. Robin spoke about his struggles with dyslexia as a child, and experiences of bullying which caused him to feel unpopular, not one of the 'cool kids'. He recalled experiences in his early adult life, which represented times of distress and great uncertainty,

You know I've been through a lot, I used to be addicted to smoking drugs, you know? But I'm not bitter about it.. its made me stronger and I've got through these things.. (White, male, 18-25yrs)

Robin remembered attending Catholic Mass with his grandparents when he stayed with them as a child, but it wasn't until he moved in and became a carer for his grandmother who was suffering with dementia, that Robin's spiritual life started to change. Robin highlighted the death of his grandmother's death as the spark which ignited his faith,

I don't know... I don't know what it was that happened to me.....Nothing changed in me, as such, but I felt an urge to go church, I felt an urge to pray more and ever since, my faith has been strengthening. (White, male, 18-25yrs)

Robin attributed his newly acquired deepening of faith to the prayers of his grandmother since her death and several times mentioned his faith in terms of bringing him 'comfort' and 'reassurance' in what must have been an extremely challenging and distressing time for the entire family. Throughout his interview, Robin continually tried to rationalise his grandmother's death in a way that made sense and could bring meaning to her suffering and death. In this way, it is possible to identify the malleable and adaptive capacities of people in the face of disorientating and debilitating life events (Rambo 1983:51).

Peter, a man in his late thirties, recounted the sense of crisis he experienced in response to both external and internal stimuli and which led him to become Catholic and to dramatically change his life. Having had an 'encounter' with Jesus in his early teens, Peter recounted that his early faith 'slipped away' and as a young adult, he had acquired

a successful career in IT, working long hours, earning lots of money and adopting an extravagant lifestyle. He explained,

[I] went to pubs, drinking, parties, all sorts of things. Got into all sorts of trouble in the world of work, I was a very worldly person, I wanted money because of this, that and the other.' (White, male, 36-50yrs)

After celebrating the birth of his daughter with his new partner, Peter recalled a downward spiral of events which led to the breakdown of the relationship, causing him to feel distressed and out of control. Peter had attended Catholic Mass whilst he visited his partner's relatives in Poland and decided one night to visit the local Catholic church near to his home. He described the experience of attending Mass at this crucial time of personal crisis and turbulence,

I came here one Sunday evening, with my daughter, and it's very structured. It's all masses, very structured. You know, you, you know what you're going to get every single time you go to Sunday mass, you go, you listen to the word of God.... You witness, cause I wasn't a Catholic, that you witness this, this mystical thing happening on the altar that you don't really understand, but you do see that there's something there. Cause what the priest is saying, what the readers are saying, then what he says in the Homily just resonates. And then you kind of convert that into, well there must be something here that's going on because it all just make sense. (White, male, 36-50yrs)

Peter's experience at Mass seemed to provide a credible pathway in Catholicism, one which provided guidance, structure and meaning and which stood in direct contrast to the reality of his own life. Robin and Peter's accounts reflected a deeply emotional response to the distressing events which had taken place in their lives, resonating with research carried out by Ullman (1982; 1989). Ullman found that religious change often occurs place within a psychological context, as an adaptive mechanism which seeks to resolve some form of conflict, such as broken relationships, past hurts or unhappy childhoods (Ullman, 1982:381-96; see also Rambo, 1993:53). Both accounts reflect

that psychologically, religious conversion can become a positive outcome from a distressing sequence of events (Allison, 1969:23-38; Rambo, 1993:53).

### **6.3.7 Crisis of faith identity – ‘the straw that breaks the camel’s back’**

Disorientation caused by a crisis of faith identity would emerge as a significant factor in leading some respondents to switch from other Christian denominations to become Catholic. This was a particularly strong theme amongst Black African respondents who had attended services both in the UK and their native countries and Anglicans, including those becoming Catholic through the Ordinariate.

For three Black African respondents who had been raised in the Pentecostal tradition, they said they had begun to question specific practices in their own churches and which caused a sense of internal disquiet. For these women, there was a discernable dissatisfaction with certain practical elements which no longer seemed to ‘fit’ or align any longer with their own religious identity and that of their families.

A Black African respondent who had been raised in the Pentecostal tradition, who had moved to England with her four children, reflected that becoming Catholic had always been on her mind. She referenced the practicalities of attending Pentecostal services with her family and there was a strong sense from the interview that becoming Catholic had been discussed frequently with her children. She explained the practical benefits of becoming Catholic for herself and her children,

even when I was going to Pentecostal [church], naturally I wanted to become Catholic and my children too, but in the Pentecostal [tradition] the service is too long, sometimes 3-4 hours, yes...Catholic is under one hour and you enjoy everything, its so peaceful.. (Black African, female, 36-50yrs)

The financial obligations associated with the Pentecostal tradition was mentioned frequently by these respondents. In some parts of the interviews, explicit mention was

made to the emotional and financial strain of contributing tithings on a regular basis when money was especially tight. At other times, reactions could be inferred from contrasting experiences of Catholic practice, 'when I come to the Catholic [church], its' so peaceful. Fr does not ask anyway, if you have any money and you want to support the church, you can just give, but not by force...'

Another Black African respondent gives a similar reflection of her own experiences,

There is no falseness, I'm not sure you know what I mean, its not like this in other churches, with Catholics its not all money, money, money and so I said to my children, 'when I leave this church (because I know I'm leaving), I'm going straight to the Catholic Church (Black African, female, 26-35yrs)

In many ways, these findings confirm the findings of Gerlach and Hine, who suggest that having a viable alternative religious option suggested at this early stage means that the religious pathway has already been laid out and as such, the move is one of natural progression (1970).

Seven respondents identified their religious affiliation as Anglican. For respondents aged 65 years and above, their decision to become Catholic had been heavily influenced by many of the recent changes which have taken place in the Church of England. The ordination of women and recognition of civil partnerships were cited as factors which had caused people to re-evaluate their continued affiliation as Anglicans. One respondent explained,

when we saw the effect of modernism on Anglican's and Anglicanism essentially by following things like the ordination of women and for going after the whole kind of LGBTQ agendas, um, really mirroring the world's philosophies.... I think there was this sense, this strong feeling that the Church of England was eroding. (White, female, 65+yrs)

For this older group of Anglican respondents, there was a definite sense that the Church of England no longer represented their Christian identity and shared value

system. Commitment to issues such as social justice, which had played a strong role in the Anglican tradition historically, became less prominent and for many, inadequate.

For those who expressed such feelings, the ordination of women was the most frequently mentioned factor in their decision to become Catholic. A female respondent explains her reasoning behind her position on female ordination,

a group of us who were fighting very hard to maintain the Catholicity in the Church of England, against the ordination of women to the priesthood, not because we were against women but because for me, unity is a higher priority than women being ordained (White, female, 65+yrs)

Tom explained that whilst he harboured a growing dissatisfaction with some of the decisions taken by the Church of England in previous years, a recent move to a new area had caused him to split mass attendance between an Anglican and Catholic church. In the midst of worshipping between two denominations, he describes the trigger moment when decided to become Catholic,

So mostly I was at [Anglican church] and coming here sometimes and then there was an excavation at [Anglican church] and I came here even more and then they started talking about women bishops and I thought well that's it, that is a shove. Yeah and then this gay marriage thing, you know I'm not anti-gay, each to their own, and I'm not homophobic or anything like that [inaudible] um, but then the concept of gay marriage actually making a mockery of the sacrament, it was another path.... (White, male, 65+yrs)

Tom expressed his sense of dissatisfaction in terms of 'not feeling right' in the Anglican faith any longer and for him, becoming Catholic was an issue of belonging. He expresses this feeling when reflecting on the impact of his decision, 'I just think that now it all feels right for me, this is where I belong'.

Significantly, for these respondents at the moment they made the decision, there was some tangible experience of Catholic practice taking place in their lives which seems to have served as a comparator, providing a contrast between the old and new spiritual pathways and which served to concretise their decision-making. Olivia who converted

in her late seventies, felt compelled to make the decision when she attended a Sunday service at her local church which was celebrated by a female priest,

Well I went to Mass one week before I had decided and there was a woman priest and I just thought, 'this is the end for me, I just cannot bear this, I have to make a decision'. I came up here when it was one of my friend's funerals, and it was just the most beautiful, gorgeous service. (White, female, 65+yrs)

In this case, the contrasting experience of the Catholic funeral service provided secondary validation for the decision to change denominations; Olivia frequently commented that in her opinion, the recent changes to the Church of England represented a move away from 'traditional Christianity' and the closely held Anglican identity that she had nurtured for over sixty years.

The majority of respondents who moved across from the Anglican church in direct response to developments such as the Ordination of women priests were aged 65 years and above. For these people, the sense of disorientation they expressed in relation to the ruptured relationship between the Anglican church and their own faith identity, caused them to feel confusion, frustration, sadness and anger. There was a tangible sense of having reached the end of the road, that the decision to move was now unequivocal; as a trigger for becoming Catholic it was significant that the decision was expressed in terms of a push or 'shove', terms adopted by Lofland and Stark in their earlier work on causal efficacy, later de-emphasised by the conversion motifs (1965:862-875; 1981:373).

Accounts from Anglican respondents who had chosen to become Catholic are cited to provide some support for the contextual backdrop against which their decision-making process can be considered and as such, present an over simplified version of what is a complex range of issues and opinions. The research was in very many ways boosted by the contributions of members of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, both parishioners and clergy and reveal there to be much more complexity to the Anglican

narrative as presented above. For this reason, an expounded section on the Anglican position as represented through the Ordinariate is discussed later in this chapter.

### **6.3.8 Positive Mechanisms**

The data revealed quite clearly that the negatively themed triggers responsible for sparking religious change were dominant, typically focusing on areas of loss and deficiency, internal disorientation through trauma, distress and illness. Rambo proposes that conversion scholars rarely study positive factors since they feel they conceal certain pathologies which adopt religion as a vehicle to answer the deeper issues which trouble people. Rambo concludes however that many people find their way to religion when crisis is not present but they simply desire ‘more’ from life (1993:50). The findings of this research found a solid tranche of people for whom positive triggers were operating in their decision to become Catholic and comprised fulfilment and a desire for the transcendent which was expressed in terms of early attraction to Catholicism.

### **6.3.9 Fulfilment**

For respondents with positive triggers for religious change, pivotal life experiences such as love associated with new romantic relationships, or the birth of a child served as a gateway to a new religious option. Direct influence of partners, family and friends meant that for these respondents, Catholicism was presented as a pathway with clear benefits and credible role models. Positive affective bonds therefore provided the springboard for religious change and a lens through which people could process religious change and understand their own happiness within this new future.

For Max, his journey to faith was motivated through a search for happiness which operated on a dual level; first, he expressed an almost blissful happiness as a result of his relationship with his fiancée, the prospect of their upcoming marriage in a Catholic

church and the significance of this for their wider family. Secondly, he had been profoundly affected by the happiness that he witnessed in Catholics around him. Max describes the disposition of his partner and the connection he makes with her faith when asked about the reasons he decided to become Catholic,

I'd love to tell you my reason, right now...because, my fiancée is Catholic, a Roman Catholic, she's Irish and she always seems happy, excited in herself and wakes up with a beautiful smile on her face all the time. (White, male, 36-50yrs)

Max's interview seemed to perfectly capture the Affectional motif in operation from the beginning of his account (Lofland, & Skonovd, 1981:379). In addition to the love he expressed for his fiancée, Max was deeply affected by the traits and characteristics of the Catholics he saw around him. Happiness was a value frequently mentioned throughout the interview as something shared by Catholics and which Max profoundly sought to experience for himself. Significantly, in proudly recounting the story of his faith development, Max actively reflected on the connection between his newly discovered faith, his relationship with his fiancée and her late mother, with whom he found acceptance and belonging,

The most amazing, incredible thing about it, me and [my partner] can marry in a Catholic church, there will be a lot of links with her mum. You know, 2 days before her mum died, I went and asked if I could ask her daughter to marry me and she said yes and to have that link is amazing....her mum was devout...(White, male, 36-50yrs)

Max's experience of falling in love with his fiancée took on an infectious quality and his warmth and happiness seemed to spill over into all areas of his life, at home and work. For Max, the path to Catholicism was the unifying factor which brought a sense of meaning to all the positive changes which had occurred in his life in the present and formed powerful connections with the close relationships he held with family members in the past.



For Helen, a young woman with a nominal Christian upbringing, whose partner was from a practising Catholic family, it was the birth of her first child which became the motivating factor behind her decision to become Catholic. Having made the decision to baptise their son, Helen felt strongly that she wanted to share in his Catholic upbringing and didn't want this responsibility to fall solely on the shoulders of her partner. Helen frequently spoke of her son with love and pride, referring to his birth as marking the end of a particularly 'bad time' in her life and that her religious journey would be catalysed through the fulfilment of motherhood. Helen expounded on the moment she realised that she wanted to be Catholic,

the birth of my son, once I had my son...definitely. So yeah, that was my big turning point. I think once I had him and I just wanted to belong to the church, then, um, I just got a sudden urge really, I don't mean know how to explain it..... It's always been something I've thought about, you know, I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it. But yeah, it was once I had him, I said, no, I'm going to do this now. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

Motherhood seemed to represent a threshold moment within a series of positive events in Helen's life, meeting her partner, getting a job she enjoyed in the local Catholic primary school and she said that she felt that her son had been sent to her for a reason. For Helen, starting her own journey to become Catholic seemed like the natural progression to her experience of being a new mother, resonating with research by Weddell in relation to transitional life stages (2012).

#### **6.3.10 Desire for transcendence: Early attraction to Catholicism**

Although simple desire to become Catholic was a common underlying explanatory factor in the long form survey question, in the interviews only one respondent mentioned the desire for transcendence in terms of the existential search as a motivating

factor behind his journey to Catholicism. David explained the remark which sparked his own religious change,

[before she died, my mum said] 'I know there are things that are far more important and bigger than mankind' and I thought afterwards, 'there's got to be' and I thought 'there's planet Earth, and all those plants in the solar system and on a clear night, I look up....how many stars are up there?' and I thought 'that didn't happen by chance'. (White, male, 65+yrs)

David very much validates Rambo's description of people who find themselves on a spiritual search for answers and to understand the meaning of life (1983:50). Significantly however the interviews revealed a more subtle presentation of people's desire for the sacred, expressed through basic attraction to elements of Catholicism which served as trigger points.

### **6.3.11 Religious attraction**

It became clear that for some respondents, introduction to religious teaching or practice would in some cases, be sufficient to trigger religious transformation. Dorothy Day's conversion experience provides a strong precedent for the ability of strong faith in others to catalyse the 'first impulse' towards Catholicism (Day 1938; see also Connor, 2001:158).

Two female respondents cited the Rosary as the trigger for their decision to become Catholic and this finding very much reinforced the assertion that mere observation of religious practice can present as a powerful inducement for curiosity and attraction. Frida explained how her attraction to Catholicism grew after seeing others praying the Rosary,

No, I only just love it, I saw people using it and I wanted to know more about it, because I knew, that Rosary belonged to Catholics. I want to know how to use it to pray, especially for my children. (Black African, female, 36-50yrs)

Andrea, a Portuguese Muslim who had recently moved to the UK confirmed that it was upon seeing a stranger pray the Rosary that instantly caused her to question her own religious identity. Andrea explained that even before being baptised, she had developed a fervent devotion to Mary, the mother of Christ. She prayed the Rosary several times daily and had asked the local parish priest for permission to build a Marian shrine in the grounds of the church. These findings are again particularly interesting in relation to Dorothy Day's conversion experience, which was sparked by the observation of seeing a close family friend devoutly praying the Rosary (Day 1938). The Rosary featured frequently in the research interviews and as such, will be discussed in greater depth in Stage 4, 'Encounter'.

#### **6.3.12 Conclusion – Stage Two 'Crisis'**

The triggers categorised in Rambo's second stage were immensely helpful in structuring and ordering the range of experiences and life events which were instrumental in leading people to consider becoming Catholic. The findings supported Rambo's nuanced interpretation of the term 'crisis' which encompassed internal disorientation, strong themes resonated around the illness and death of loved ones and sequential, traumatic life events which caused the Protean Self to search out religion as a way of restoring order, balance and equilibrium.

New themes emerged relating to the crisis of meaning in contemporary culture, the blurring of traditional gender boundaries, feelings of being outside established faith communities and the desire for belonging reinforced the ways in which people in the research had embraced religion as a way of introducing a new, consistent framework for life. For these people, Catholicism provided a value-based structure which brought meaning and a sense of plausibility to their lives, and as such resonates strongly with Berger's assertion that religion has a major role to play in pluralist cultures where

choice dominates and individualism reigns. The addition of new categories to Rambo's second stage framework was a particularly exciting outcome. In particular, the new positive theme of attraction to Catholicism was significant in developing an understanding of the raw, basic appeal of Catholicism in modern culture and the mechanisms involved in building a contemporary Catholic identity which will be discussed further in Stage Four (Chapter Seven).

The impact of pivotal life events such as new life, death, and close relationships, both positively and negatively, supported Woodhead's (2016; 2018) assertion that religion has an important role to play in marking major life stages, and that these hold the potential for being gateways for profound religious experience which is often felt before being fully understood. Inextricably linked to this observation, is the influence of interpersonal bonds and close relationships in triggering religious change. The Affectional motif was found to be particularly dominant in Rambo's second stage of crisis. In many cases, simple exposure to Catholicism through key relationships was sufficient to ignite the spiritual process, presenting the Catholic faith as an attractive, radical and valid opportunity worth pursuing. In keeping with the major variations within the motif, the experiences of those affected by current, existing relationships were linked with a milder emotional range, displayed a longer timeframe and relied on an underlying level of social support (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981:375).

The impact of the new branch motif, Affective Synthesis was heightened in this second stage. In their conversion accounts, respondents began to actively recall poignant memories, reminiscences and links to past relationships and connect them with their current experiences, which were frequently emotionally charged. The impact of religious memories, seemed to be cumulative in nature and layered upon nostalgic contextual experiences from early childhood, which became especially powerful once

reactivated later in life. In terms of the presentation of the conversion motifs in Stage Two, there was less resonance with the traditional presentation of the mystical motif and greater prominence of the Affectional motif (and its' new branch) and the power of attachment in the positive re-evaluation of Catholicism as a new religious option (Lofland & Starke 1965:864-871; Lofland & Skonovd, 1981:375; Starke & Finke 2000:21, 124, Bruce, 2015:14; Crossley 2006:143; Everton 2018:35).

## 6.4 Stage Three – Quest

<b>Stage 3</b>  <b>Quest</b>
<i>Response Style</i> <i>Active</i> <i>Passive</i> <i>Structural Availability</i> <i>Emotional</i> <i>Intellectual</i> <i>Religious</i> Motivational Structures Experience pleasure and avoid pain Conceptual system Enhance self-esteem Establish and maintain relationships Power Transcendence  <b>Key:</b> <i>Areas of resonance – italicised</i> <b>Areas of divergence – bold</b>

Figure 15: Stage Three 'Quest'

Having previously explored the range of factors which trigger religious change, Rambo's third stage of 'Quest' moves to consider the response style of individuals engaged on a journey of religious change (1993:58).

Rambo helpfully posits a continuum of response styles which individuals frequently adopt and which become significant in this stage: (1) 'active questing' is characterised by the exploration for a new religious option, motivated through desire for fulfilment, meaning or through dissatisfaction with the 'old ways'; (2) the 'receptive' style relates to a person who is ready for the new religious option for a number of reasons; (3) 'rejecting' pertains to an individual who rejects the new option in a conscious and deliberate way; (4) 'apathetic' describes a distinct lack of interest in the new religious option and is particularly relevant in secular modern culture; (5) finally the 'passive' style describes an individual who is so weak that they are unable to resist the influence of internal or external forces (1993:59).

Rambo identifies a further set of factors which can either facilitate the religious journey or prevent its progress and development; these include structural, emotional, intellectual

and religious availability. Structural availability relates to the freedom an individual has to pursue a new religious option; time constraints, commitments imposed through family or work and financial considerations are all factors which affect an individuals' general sense of receptivity. The overall sense of emotional availability through personal, family and peer group reactions to becoming identified with a new religion can impact an individuals' decision-making capacity greatly. Rambo asserts that consistency and uniformity are profound factors which determine an individual's general sense of freedom, ease and receptivity to the new religious pathway. In terms of intellectual availability, Rambo suggests that in order that the cognitive content of the new religious option is attractive, there must be some resonance or continuity which will enable the individual to grasp the new message or teaching. Rambo asserts, 'The cognitive framework of a movement or option must be somewhat compatible with a person's previous orientation or there will be no attraction' (1993:61).

Finally, Rambo asserts that religious availability has a strong part to play in an individual's' decision to pursue religious conversion and suggests that childhood and family religious background can determine how readily an individual changes religious adherence. Research by Yeakley reveals that people who were raised in mixed religious backgrounds, were more likely to consider religious change, reinforcing the importance of socio-cultural context in religious narratives. (quoted in Rambo, 1993:62).

At the stage of quest, the decision to enter the religious path can be definitive but the practicalities of the quest are far from straightforward and the first experience of the cost of pursuing the new religious option becomes visible and real. This discussion aims to explore the process for people once religious awakening has been ignited and before formal encounter takes place, to identify where people sit on the continuum of

receptivity to the new religious option, looking closely at issues of availability, challenge, and cost.

#### **6.4.1 Active seekership**

Of the twenty-two respondents interviewed for the research, ten people displayed an active response style. Their conversion narratives demonstrated strong themes of initiative-taking and self-assigned responsibility to further their own religious awakening and for people in this category, issues of structural and intellectual availability were dominant. It is perhaps unsurprising to learn that all but one of the ‘Nones’ and ‘irreligious’ respondents were found in this active seekership group and this will be explored in greater depth. All but two of the group, who were raised in the Pentecostal tradition, classified themselves as White British.

For those who displayed an active response to the stirrings of early religious awakening, there was a keen sense of ownership of their own religious journeys, which was frequently accompanied by positive emotions. This finding very much echoed the work of Richardson and Yamane, who assert that those who assume responsibility in this way, also regard their religious development as something precious, a valuable treasure which must be protected at all costs (Richardson 1985:163-179; Yamane 2014:7).

Upon first meeting Anne, a young Russian woman living on site in the school at which she taught languages, it was evident that Anne was driven to become Catholic and embodied the notion of quest. Anne had been motivated to become Catholic having experienced Mass with her fiancé and soon to be parents-in-law; she felt that this experience had ignited an existing interest in Catholicism which she had privately nurtured throughout her childhood and early adult life. Anne explained that in her late teens, she had moved towns frequently and had approached the local Catholic churches



a few times to enquire about learning more about the Catholic faith. Anne felt that she had not proceeded with her early enquiry due to the lack of RCIA groups at local churches and a missing connection with the priest she spoke with at the time,

And obviously the churches [I approached] for whatever reason, can't offer [RCIA courses] because they don't have the catechists...it takes a lot of organization doesn't it? I suppose if there aren't other people there who want to convert...why would they offer it? So I lived in Torquay when I was in Devon and the closest course that was available was in Exeter.. but I just, uh, the priest, I just didn't connect with him, so I wouldn't do it in Exeter. So I waited a year until I went to university, I could do it at university. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

As one of the youngest respondents in the study, Anne demonstrated a particularly focused and determined quest to educate herself about the Catholic faith. Her impressive self-directed course of study only took her so far after which time, she felt acutely aware of her own need for social connection with others, bringing her to the point of encounter. Having seen a notice in the parish bulletin of her fiancé's church advertising RCIA, she made an appointment to speak with the priest.

I was asking questions, like, my boyfriend could answer them, his mother, other people at the church. But again, you need to be taught through the RCIA course or by catechists...sometimes I would ask one question and people either had no idea or would tell me different answers. And so because of that, I found that I need to actually talk with someone. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

Issues of structural availability were predominant for this group of active seekers. Sporadic availability of RCIA classes was a central theme for many respondents and featured strongly in their practical quest to become Catholic. Respondents with little knowledge or experience of religious practice frequently described the somewhat haphazard and lengthy process of internet research to find easily digestible information describing the ways to become Catholic. What was frequently recounted was an unnecessarily complicated process of information gathering to first discover the existence of the RCIA and then to find a church nearby at

which classes were offered and to contact their local parish priest; this process was particularly difficult for those with little social support at this early stage.

For Mia, a young African woman in her late twenties, she described her own extensive physical search for a church which offered RCIA, at a time which would fit in with her work and childcare arrangements.

I didn't know any Catholic churches nearby, there was Trinity church but I couldn't go because I was working....I felt guided to this church by God, I travelled for 2 hours one Sunday afternoon to find the right church, you have to feel at home in a church and I knew it was this one that I should stay at. (Black African, female, 26-35yrs)

Attending Mass at this church was an integral part of Mia's quest to find out how she would proceed with her religious journey. Respondents would often say that they had been 'lucky' or 'fortunate' to find a group at their nearby church and this reflected a process which felt more providential than logical. This finding alone carries significant implications for the evangelisation model used by the church, which operates in a culture in which the internet is a portal, a powerful signal for information which should be immediate, accessible and easily digestible. This finding is highlighted by Gaitano, who asserts the power of the internet as a mirror and expression of modern culture (2016:167). The fact that many respondents persisted with their search in spite of initial difficulties finding the right information or failing to find available groups is testimony to the tenacious spirit of many active seekers.

What became increasingly clear was that for those respondents with an active response style, issues of structural availability (having long journey's to get to class, having to wait over a year to find a church with a suitable RCIA group) were in many ways to be managed and overcome rather than reasons to prevent them continuing their religious journey. When Frida agreed to give an interview, she began by saying that she had little

energy and felt very tired as she had rushed to the group after finishing work, having first prepared dinner for her four children before leaving. As a single parent, Frida had initially come to RCIA a few years before but had stopped attending due to what were significant childcare issues. It was extremely interesting to hear Frida rationalise the reason for the interruption in her religious journey as being an internal one rather than attributing responsibility to challenging external factors, 'I came here before, in 2015, but I wasn't serious about it and so I had to step down because of the children' (Black African, female, 36-50yrs).

As Frida's four children were now older, the challenges were different ones and were linked with coinciding her own religious journey with that of her children, who had also decided to become Catholic. Frida describes the organisational and practical issues involved in bringing the family into the Catholic faith,

the challenge is my baby, this class is every Friday, my other 2 children's classes are on a Saturday, so their dates don't match with the others. So I come on Friday, the baby comes on Saturday and then we come again on Sunday, so its a little bit hard (laughing) These are the little challenges I face. (Black African, female, 36-50yrs)

Few respondents who had taken an active role in their faith journey saw reason for such challenges to end their religious quest, but instead embarked on a process of rearranging life and juggling arrangements so that the journey can continue. This was a very interesting finding, given Rambo's emphasis on the powerful effect of the various networks on people's lives and the practical concerns which often outweigh the practicability of exploring the new religious option (Rambo; 1993:60). At this stage therefore, it is possible to see some powerful motivational structures operating which furnish people with benefits worth pursuing. Anne, Mia and Frida expressed such strong desire for transcendence and relationship with God in addition to supportive

social connections, that they were willing to undergo considerable challenges to pursue the direction of faith.

#### **6.4.2 Intellectual motif**

Within the active seeker group the emergence of the Intellectual conversion motif became a dominant element of the quest process for three respondents (Lofland & Sknonovd, 1981: 376). In these narratives, the activist approach was a significant theme and one which was strongly connected with the literature (Lofland & Stark, 1965:862-875; Straus 1976:160; Richardson 1979:163-179). This theme was revealed often through respondents' robust and thorough approach to learning and absorbing the Catholic faith. Undergirding this process was a full acceptance of responsibility for their own faith journey, a process of working through major theological questions, learning and absorbing the historical origins of the church, in effect taking their faith knowledge of Catholicism from a rudimentary to sophisticated level of understanding. In many ways the initial questions or challenges they had previously held about Catholicism were being tested through a process of rigorous intellectual examination. There was a sense of expectation and challenge in these accounts, of the very real possibility that the initial spark of enquiry would somehow be quashed or extinguished when placed under the spotlight. For these respondents however was a shared recognition that the deeper they dug, the more capacious and rich they found the Catholic faith to be.

As discussed earlier, Anne provided the first example of a respondent who, in the place of an available RCIA group, began a self-prescribed process of intellectual discovery through a programme of Catholic literature, in order to advance her newly awakened faith journey. Mark began to read about Catholic teaching from the resources and materials brought home by his partner, who had engaged in RCIA to deepen her own

faith. For Mark it was the connection with those early religious fragments which validated the information he was absorbing and brought with it a quality of authenticity which solidified his quest. He explained,

I never realised that the Catholic church offers you the ability to [maintain a spiritual life, lead a good life] more than other churches because they have the mechanics to do that, so Fatima or Faustina, prayers, structure, what I call the machinery, in order for you to be able to get hold of something which is an eternal mystery. You need that... (White, male, 51-65yrs)

Having converted to Christianity as an adult, Tristan was an Anglican with strong evangelical connections, who became a strong model for the Intellectual motif in practice. Tristan displayed a strong ecumenical sentiment and this was reflected in his reading a broad range of Christian theologians. Tristan and his wife, also Anglican, would frequently visit Taize, which introduced him to a more contemplative rather than charismatic style of worship, a style he had been most familiar with. Exposure to various Catholic practices caused Tristan to begin to read Church history, in which he started to become aware of the Catholic ecclesiology of the early church. Tristan explains the question which caused him to embark on his quest towards Catholicism,

then I started thinking about who has the authority to define Truth, to define, Dogmatise, what is true, what is heresy and of course one of the problems with Protestantism is that there is no authority, we are each our own authority in that sense and everybody comes to Scripture equally, however ill-informed we are and there are endless views. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

Amongst his Protestant friends, Tristan saw general agreement on the broad, foundation issues such as the historical resurrection and the creeds, however, there was less consensus amongst the 'lower' issues, as he described them, such as morality and human sexuality. His intellectual quest into Catholic theology caused him to find many answers to his questions, which then seemed to illuminate the Catholic faith in a new way. Tristan describes having to challenge and confront a range of Protestant

prejudices against Catholicism and there were echoes with Mark's re-evaluation of fragmentary Catholic teaching and dogma. He describes a sense of reassurance in the fact that all the scholars he read mentioned the same early church sources and this finding again echoes Rambo's assertion that consistency is key when considering intellectual availability to accept the new perspective. Tristan found himself looking anew at some of the foundational 'touchstone' issues which served to distinguish Protestants from Catholics, such as the Communion of Saints and found himself defending these with his Anglican friends. He summarised his intellectual findings,

I found myself unpicking all the assumptions I had carried with me and found that the Catholics have a good story to tell but they are just really lousy at telling it (laughing). (White, male, 51-65yrs)

Tristan readily admitted that he had invested a great deal of time to reading and researching the Catholic faith, introducing daily devotional practices such as the Rosary and incorporated the Liturgy of Hours into his daily prayer routine. In many ways, Tristan was a model of active seekership, he took full responsibility for developing and nurturing his spiritual life and his faith transformation before entering the next stage of formal encounter.

The accounts of Anne, Mark and Tristan not only celebrate the emergence of the Intellectual motif at the point of quest, but also support Rambo's assertion that the process of intellectual enquiry is particularly relevant for those sensitive to cognitive familiarity or consistency (1983:61). For Mark, his intellectual enquiry completed missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle which surrounded fragmentary Catholic experiences in childhood; for Tristan, he was able to use his Protestant background to re-envisage the Catholic faith through the lens of his own perspective. It is important to emphasise

that all respondents in this group engaged in what Straus calls ‘creative bumbling’, a haphazard, combing through resources, with no formal process of strategizing (Straus, 1976:160; see also Rambo 1993:56). There are parallels here to be drawn again between the challenges encountered by respondents trying to locate local churches and information regarding RCIA groups. Those engaging in active seekership at the point of quest seem propelled to find information, overcoming some very rudimentary challenges along the way and again, there seem to be valuable lessons to be learnt on the part of the missionary life of the church.

#### **6.4.3 Receptive response style**

Twelve people interviewed adopted a receptive response to their newly awakened faith. Ten of these respondents had been raised in other Christian denominations, eight self-classified as White British, two as Black African. Of the two remaining respondents, one was Catholic and one identified as a ‘None’. The age profile of this group was much older than the active seeker group, with respondents equally distributed between the age groups 36-50 and 65+yrs. It is perhaps consequential of the age profile of this group, that people tended to display less independently initiated action, a more pragmatic approach to religious change and demonstrated a spectrum of affective content. As distinct from active seekers, for receptive seekers, emotional and religious availability were dominant themes.

#### **6.4.4 Emotional availability – the cost of becoming Catholic.**

For those in the active seekers group, there was a characteristic resilience in their mindset towards challenges and obstacles which presented in the pathway to religious development. Negative reaction from family and friends was taken with passive acceptance which almost bordered indifference, the content of which for many was simply laid aside as an accepted part of their faith journey. Callum, one of the younger

respondents said only that his mother was 'wary' when he told her that he was considering becoming Catholic and mentioned this almost as an afterthought. Helen disclosed that she would only share her faith journey with close family and seemed to expect and accept a potential lack of understanding. She explained,

I mean if I told my friends that I was doing this, they'd probably laugh at me and yeah, that's how faith is probably regarded in my age range now anyway...and that's no fault of theirs. They just never been brought up with any religion or have any beliefs. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

Helen was keen to emphasise however that if the subject arose and she was asked directly, she would be happy to say she was becoming a Catholic and would declare this with pride. The neutrality with which people in this group responded to external perceptions implied an accompanying lack of impact on their personal faith journeys; as Peter neatly summarised when talking about the difference between his religious pathway and the secular lives of his friends, 'It's like they're running on a different petrol!'

For respondents in the receptive seeker group however, the views and perceptions of peers, family and friends seemed to carry much more weight in their faith journey and occupied a more influential role in the path to becoming Catholic. For Abebe, he had observed over time that his workmates displayed a noticeable gap in the values they held to be important and those which he had identified in the Gospels. The views and perceptions of his workmates validated his own feelings towards becoming Catholic since he knew he did not want to follow a secular lifestyle and its accompanying value system. He described the moment he disclosed his feelings to his friends,

I told a few [friends] who were not religious and I think they thought my interest in religion was a little strange. I think the majority of people I worked with had no religion (I found that life was very stressful at work) but they also did not share the values that I had begun to see in Christianity and I felt as though theirs wasn't the direction I wanted to pursue. (Black African, male, 36-50yrs)



In their interviews, receptive seekers mentioned several significant factors regarding their relationships and personal arrangements which needed thorough consideration before moving to the next stage of formal encounter. For people in this group, there was a fragility to their accounts which suggested that their pathways to Catholicism were less straightforward and were more susceptible to fracture.

Following the death of her mother, which sparked an interest in Catholicism, Lydia admitted that she experienced an almost daily process of internal questioning and doubt regarding her new religious journey. Having minimal experience of religious practice and belief, Lydia experienced a tangible dissonance between her secular life and her new religious identity, her late mother being the only connection linking the two. For Lydia, issues around her own developing religious identity had caused a radical shift in her own family dynamics; her husband who Lydia described as being ‘anti-religion’ and her children, who had experienced a secular upbringing were sceptical and troubled at the prospect of Lydia becoming Catholic. She described the initial reactions of one of her daughters,

My oldest daughter, who's very much in line with her father's way of thinking, just said, ‘as long as you don't start talking to me about it’, and I said 'no I won't, you know, this is for me. It's just something that I want to do. And it's personal to me’. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

As a receptive seeker, it became clear that Lydia frequently oscillated between her potential new faith journey and returning to her former way of being. In this position of uncertainty, she concealed her faith journey in the early stages and frequently sought the opinions and guidance of others. In many ways, it became clear that Lydia was gathering a portrait of several different ways of being Catholic, which ultimately, would help to build the foundations for her own faith identity. Lydia recounted talking with neighbours who had blended religious families and admits to ‘grilling them’ to find out

how faith relationships worked in practice. Lydia found friends from the church who also knew her mother to be especially supportive, one pair of ladies who she would frequently visit for a cup of tea and talk about issues of faith seemed to be key role models for a type of Catholicism which challenged the traditional role models Lydia associated with strong faith. This finding resonated strongly with the literature regarding the importance of relationship building, as a way to perceive oneself within the new religious framework and to establish familiarity with members of the religious community (Berger 1967; Lofland & Stark 1965:862-875; Lofland & Skonovd 1981:379; Bruce 2014:15-16; Everton 2018:94).

Although Tristan was classified as an active seeker, his experience is relevant in this discussion about emotional availability; as one of the oldest respondents in the active seeker group, Tristan experienced significant inner turmoil regarding his growing interest in Catholicism and the theme of oscillation between his former life and contemplation of how life as a Catholic might work, paralleled Lydia's experience in many ways.

From Tristan's account it became clear that the cost of becoming Catholic was weighty and tangible. Tristan had a strong marriage and an established network of friends who belonged to his former Anglican community; for Tristan, the practical and spiritual significance of separating himself from the community at which his wife would continue to worship created what he called a 'tussle' internally. He describes the prospect of becoming Catholic, a journey which he felt compelled to pursue, and the implications for his marriage,

I'm, yearning now to receive communion, you know, that's real, its something I'm wanting to happen. Uh, but at the same time, I just, the thing that would hold me back, would be that idea of us worshiping in two separate places. And that intuitively [and spiritually] feels wrong. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

Tristan affirmed that the response of Anglican friends towards his religious journey was one of support and of concern. There was widely held perception amongst Tristan's friends that Catholics practised a very austere form of worship at Mass, which seemed to make them miserable, that Catholic mass was deficient in joyful worship and this was particularly contrasted with the style of worship Tristan regularly practised in his former community. The concern therefore seemed to stem from a wariness over the appropriateness of Tristan's new Catholic identity, that his passion for ecumenism may somehow be wasted or underappreciated. In particular, doctrinal issues such as the Catholic reverence for Mary, the Mother of God and that of the saints meant that many of Tristan's Anglican friends regarded Catholicism with suspicion. Tristan recounts a recent painful experience with his close friend and spiritual confessor,

we go on walks, um, regularly and we just share. He's a Baptist and finds this almost like a betrayal. There's a sense of, I mean he's very, you know, he's journeying with me. He's not breaking fellowship with me, but it's a really hard thing because we had so much in common, you know, spiritually... and yet there are all sorts of things I'm getting life from that he no longer understands. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

In terms of emotional availability, the accounts of those in quest displayed a spectrum of responses from family and friends, which more active seekers tended to regard more neutrally but carried greater weight for those exhibiting a receptive response style. The accounts above however present an accurate picture of the profound cost of becoming Catholic, not only for the individual but their loved ones, friends and members of the wider community.

#### **6.4.5 Religious availability**

Of the twelve respondents in the receptive seeker group, seven were Anglicans. Five of these respondents had the opportunity to enter the church via the Ordinariate pathway and as such, issues around religious availability featured heavily in their interviews.

For this small group of respondents, their decision to become Catholic had been heavily influenced by dissatisfaction relating to recent changes in the Church of England. Respondents often reported feeling uncomfortable in expressing the prospect of denominational change with their family and friends, themselves practising Anglicans. Questions around how and when they would 'make the move' to Catholicism became emotionally charged issues bathed in uncertainty and confusion. The decree issued by the Doctrine of the Faith in 2011, supported by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, provided the means by which these respondents could comfortably see a viable pathway through which they could be received into full Communion with the Catholic Church whilst retaining much of their Anglican heritage and tradition. As one elderly respondent comments, 'I've always been grateful to Pope Benedict for bringing us the Ordinariate, it was wonderful.' (White, female, 65+yrs)

Two former Anglican priests who were themselves contemplating the move to become part of the Ordinariate, saw the Decree as a concrete way to safeguard the unity of the episcopate and to lay a pathway for the New Evangelisation. They were passionate leaders and displayed a profound sense of responsibility for the parishioners they guided to become Catholic in this way. One clergy member reflected on this process of consultation, which was very often undertaken from the pulpit,

I just stood up and said, this is what I think needs to happen....there's two noble things to do, to remain in good conscience or to go. We faced up to it with confidence and we didn't sort of whisper about it. We just went for it. Yeah. People went, yeah, actually that makes sense. And they needed leadership back to strength and leadership and I think, you know, again this goes deeper into the culture. (White, Clergy, 36-50yrs)

For respondents in this group, the process of quest involved a lengthy period of consultation and consideration, weighing the pros and cons of a move to the Ordinariate as an explicitly rational evaluation (Gartrell & Shannon 1985:37, see also Gooren,

2007:341). Their uncertainty and need for guidance made them cautious but receptive seekers, who were determined for change but highly conscious of the associated personal cost. The religious availability of the Ordinariate pathway was a strong motivating factor to become Catholic but had to be countered against the highly charged emotional climate within both their existing and future worshipping communities.

An elderly couple interviewed spoke about a group to which they belonged within the Church of England whose main aim was to preserve the Catholicity of the church. They explained the outcome of a proposition by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to the Synod to create a 'safe place' for those unable to accept the ordination of women,

the CofE is supposed to be episcopally led and synodically governed, and so for two bishops to put something forward and to have that voted down by the Synod, I found that very damaging. There were 3 of us who were for the Ordinariate and we were very much trying to preserve the dignity of worship. (White, female, 65+yrs)

What can be heard in this account is the story of a battle undergone by these respondents and others like them, to effect change in the church and the resulting pain and sadness at the realisation that the battle has been lost. A common theme amongst respondents considering the Ordinariate was a sense of gratitude and pride towards their parish priest who they saw as pioneering a new way forward and shepherding their flock to new pastures. It was in response to the strong and decisive leadership qualities of the clergy in these accounts that moved people through their quest for religious change and towards a position of encounter.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the earliest stages of spiritual awakening, thereby seeking to provide an answer to one of the primary questions undergirding this research, 'Why do people become Catholic?' Using stages One to Three of Rambo's model, it was

possible to focus on the pre-encounter phase of religious change, identifying dominant triggers and major motivational factors. By identifying the contextual factors, triggers and response style of contemporary Britons, the findings highlighted the forces at work within people's lives before they even step through the doorway of the church since, as was revealed, the process of religious change is already established and underway. As such, this information has significant implications for the Church's mission of evangelising within a contemporary context.

The qualitative data explored in Stage One, revealed that the process of becoming Catholic is highly contextual. People were profoundly aware of the impact of living in an increasingly secularised society and saw an explicit connection between secularity and a loss of central human values. For some, contemporary culture had caused a blurring of traditional gender roles between men and women and with this realisation, an accompanying sense of confusion and loss of meaning. In this context therefore, Christianity and specifically Catholicism brought clarity within the higher ideals embraced within the Gospel values and for many people, represented a plausible solution to the deficiencies in contemporary society.

Childhood experiences were a powerful early receptor for religious sensibility. For the 'Nones', they were acutely aware that the cultural Christianity of their childhoods had not transmitted faith and they were able to clearly differentiate between deeply held and nominal belief represented through 'box ticking' church attendance at Christmas and Easter. In her research exploring the perceptions of primary school children, Benoit found that children tend to ignore lived religion and find it difficult to situate themselves within religious debates and conversation, believing them to be somewhat distanced from their own experience (Benoit 2018). Factors such as childhood experiences of denominational switching in early childhood had the effect of causing

people to reflect more deeply on whether they were in the right faith as adults and also made the notion of changing religious affiliation as adults a much more fluid possibility. Unsurprisingly, adolescence revealed itself to be a particularly fragile stage of faith development, a key time of intense and driven spiritual exploration. In addition to being a key development phase when young adults are establishing their own identities, role and placement in society, they were keen to explore religious faith in a socially patterned ways, to see how this was embodied in family, friends and peers and how it might work in their lives. Recent empirical research by Reinhart explored the role that local, urban churches play in nurturing commitment and identity. She asserts that for young adults, patterns of collective religious identity are activated in Church and defined through key role models harnessed through clergy leadership (Reinhart 2021). The presence or absence therefore of adequate social networks and relationships with supportive spiritual role models, meant that faith could be equally bolstered or extinguished.

Relationships played a pivotal role in early childhood experiences and in adolescence, which initially supported the presence of the Affectional motif in operation. Whilst inter-personal bonds had a huge influence on the introduction of faith in adulthood, memories and nostalgic reminiscence of childhood experience of Catholicity through loved ones in the past, was identified as an important connective to the awakening of faith in adulthood. As a result of this important finding, I was able to propose a new branch of the Affectional motif which I termed 'Affective Synthesis'.

The focus on 'Crisis' in Stage Two of Rambo's model saw the continued visibility of the Affectional motif in both positive and negative triggers. Dominant triggers to spiritual awakening occurred in response to the illness and death of others, to the sequential distress caused through catalyst life experiences such as divorce, employment

or lack of, the pressures of raising a family and the trauma emerging from a crisis of meaning in life. For a small number of people, a profound mystical experience caused them to re-evaluate their religious choices; this tended to occur within an established framework of religious experiences and enquiry rather than presenting suddenly, out of the blue. A core number of Anglicans experienced a crisis in their religious identity, in response to changes in the Church of England which represented a push or shove toward religious change, it was the straw which broke the camel's back. Dominant positive influences were revealed in central themes around the desire for happiness, fulfilment and pursuit of the Transcendent, this final factor to a lesser degree. Pure attraction to Catholic tradition and practices such as the Rosary was found to be significant and observed faith in others was found to be a powerful transmitter.

Having established the dominant factors and motivational influences which spark spiritual awakening, Rambo's third stage of 'Quest' provided a picture of contemporary British people seeking Catholicism. For those engaged in Active seekership, there was a tangible sense of ownership and profound responsibility for their religious journey. People in this group were brave, tenacious people prepared to withstand stress, anxiety and substantial personal cost in the process of becoming Catholic. The physical search for Catholicism was often complex but active seekers saw this as something to be managed and overcome rather than abandoned. The Intellectual motif was visible in relation to an active response style, exhibited through a self-initiated and driven pursuit of Catholic teaching and dogma. This was especially interesting given the contemporary climate, within which faith is becoming more privatised and reliance on the internet to source religious materials and resources is prioritised.

Whilst active seekers tended to be younger and to encompass the majority of 'Nones' interviewed for this research, receptive seekers tended to be older people, aged between



36-50 or aged over 65 years. The path to becoming Catholic was expressed as both fragile and weighty in relation to the impact on family and friends, past and present, and therefore issues of emotional and religious availability were dominant for this group. The first three stages in Rambo's model demonstrate that in the context of navigating personal religious change, contemporary Britons take serious responsibility for developing and pursuing their faith journey, often in the face of substantial personal cost. The next chapter seeks to explore the availability and preparedness of the Church in supporting people through the process of adult initiation and formal encounter.

## **7 CHAPTER SEVEN: Becoming Catholic. Exploring the complexities of developing religious identity.**

### **7.1 Introduction**

Whilst Chapter Six concentrated very much on the influences which guided people towards an early interest in Catholicism, the following chapter focuses on Stages Four (Encounter) and Five (Interaction) and will explore the findings in light of the ideals relating to adult initiation and the lived reality.

Exploration of Stage Four begins by looking at the missionary approach of the church and the role of the advocate, moving to explore the subjective experience of encounter from the perspective of the individual. The diverse pathways through which people connect with the church occupies a substantial space in the following discussion in addition to considering the benefits gained in this very early stage of religious change, such as techniques for living, a sense of belonging and community and expanded social networks. Integral to these considerations are the pivotal attractions to Catholicism which begin to emerge during formal Encounter and these will be explored in correlation to the establishment of early Catholic identity.

Stage Five explores Interaction and focuses in depth on the processes of formal adult initiation catechesis which were adopted in participating parishes; these included various models such as one to one catechesis, evangelisation and pre-evangelisation courses and RCIA groups. This section of the discussion looks at the practical reality of both attending and delivering RCIA from the perspectives of Catechumens, Candidates and catechists. Although the scope of this research meant that the findings on commitment (Stage Six) were limited, the experiences of respondents captured in

follow-up interviews shed light on moments of surrender and liberation for those who had experienced feelings of uncertainty and doubt throughout the process.

## 7.2 Stage Four: Encounter

Advocate
Secular attitudes
Theory of conversion
<i>Inducements to conversion</i>
<i>Advocate's strategy</i>
<i>Strategic style</i>
<i>Diffuse</i>
<i>Concentrated/Personalistic</i>
Modes of Contact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Discovering RCIA</b></li><li>• <b>Parish selection</b></li><li>• <b>The role of the parish priest in early encounter</b></li></ul>
Public/private
Personal/Impersonal
<i>Benefits of conversion</i>
<i>System of meaning</i>
<i>Emotional gratification</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Belonging</b></li></ul>
<i>Techniques for living</i>
Leadership
Power
<i>Advocate and Convert</i>
Initial response
Resistance
Diffusion of innovation
Differential motivation and experiences
Missionary adaptations
Convert adaptations

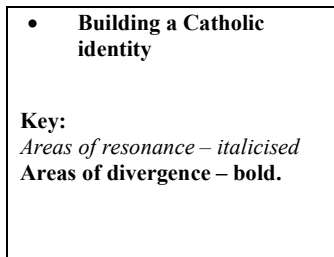


Figure 16: Stage Four 'Encounter'

Of all the stages in Rambo's model, the process of Encounter seemed the most fragile and tenuous, whilst at the same time representing a crucial point in the conversion journey (1993:87). Rambo summarises the precarious nature of the Encounter phase,

what makes any voluntary conversion process possible is a complex, confluence of the 'right' potential convert coming into contact, under proper circumstances at the proper time, with the 'right' advocate and religious option. Trajectories of potential converts and available advocates do not often meet in such a way that the conversion process can germinate, take root and flourish. (1993:87)

Rambo suggests that few studies of conversion focus heavily on the role of the advocate in the religious journey but asserts this to be a rich source of material regarding several important factors which undergird what Rambo terms, the 'crucial interplay between the advocate and the potential convert' (1993:66).

### 7.2.1 Theory of conversion

To understand the role of the advocate fully in guiding and accompanying individuals through their religious transformation, it is first necessary to understand the predominant missionary approach of the Catholic church. Rambo suggests that all missionary activity falls within a continuum in terms of strategy and intensity of approach; Catholicism, he asserts falls broadly in the middle of the spectrum and deploys a wide range of high-quality resources and strategies within the overall missionary strategy of the church through the process of inculturation.

Rambo asserts that the strategic missionary style can be diffuse or concentrated, or present as a mixture between the two, again on the evangelistic continuum (1993:79).

Within a diffuse style, the advocate attempts to work broadly in the community, effecting large scale and wide consensus through discourse with leaders. A concentrated or personalistic style, relies on the advocate to intensely indoctrinate individuals and will often concentrate on building smaller pockets or communities among the marginalised. The interplay between the active approach and the missionary style of the clergy has again presented on a spectrum, with visible, active outreach within the community at one extreme to reception of active seekership at the other, with a blending of the two in between.

### **7.2.2 The Advocate's strategic style**

The four priests who agreed to be interviewed in their role as advocate, revealed a wide range of evangelistic strategies which placed them at the active end of missionary spectrum, working visibly and actively within the wider community whilst also being accessible to individual seekers. It is perhaps unsurprising to discover that these clergy came from participating parishes with comparatively large numbers of people seeking to become Catholic each year, including those who were willing to participate in this research; this finding in itself is perhaps a testimony to the success of their missionary style.

A priest who had become Catholic via the Ordinariate reflected that the church must adopt a missionary approach, remaining open to the nourishment required for existing members of the community and opportunities of evangelistic outreach for new members. He outlined the distinction between a missionary and a 'chaplaincy' approach,

priests who simply see themselves as chaplains to a community...manage the community they're given and don't necessarily see them as a group of people to be catechised, grown (in every sense of the word)...the chaplains model is antagonistic to evangelisation and for me, as somebody who has been received

into the church as an adult, evangelisation is at the centre of everything. (White, Clergy, 65+yrs)

Whilst reflecting on his decision to adopt a one-to one approach towards adult initiation, he considered the tendency for many people to turn primarily to the internet for their information. The priest recognised that the only ‘common factor’ that linked those seeking reception into the church in his area, was that they had selected the church in response to discovering the parish website and related social media. Whilst he acknowledged the wealth of information instantly available at the touch of a button, he emphasised the importance of having a guide, an advocate with whom to exchange and share information, questions and experiences and he emphasised the inherent dangers of ‘going it alone’ for too long. He explained,

[intellectual endeavour] can be a good thing but also a bad thing, because [people] are unsupervised as it were. I tend to think that ‘Evangelium’ is good because it is based on the catechism and if you're working through it in bite sized chunks, then its attractive to make sense of it...one of the great beauties of the faith, is how it hangs together, people can see that if you start to take bits out, then the whole thing collapses in a great heap. (White, Clergy, 65+yrs)

For this priest, the most important quality in the strategic style was to be receptive and accessible. He explained,

the key thing however is for the priest to be available, because in many parishes the priest is not available, the first thing I did when I came into this parish was to make sure that parishioners had my phone number and many people said 'oh that's great, you're the first one to give us your mobile number..erm.... if you're not giving your mobile number out, then presumably you're not giving it to people who may just want to talk to you about their faith in Jesus and so I think it is a mindset thing. (White, Clergy, 65+yrs)

On first meeting this priest, he kindly gave a tour of the church and carefully explained the painstaking and time-consuming process of building and renovating the original church building which had been assigned to the community upon entering the Church via the Ordinariate. In a profoundly symbolic act, he described how he had, at great

cost, replaced the imposing, wooden doors for glass. He described his first impressions when he arrived at the parish,

when you came into the Narthex space, you couldn't tell what was beyond it and so what you were committing yourself to when you came through the door ...with the glass, you can see what's inside and what's in there and you might think 'oh i can see what's through there and it looks quite nice and I could cope with going though that' and I think that is a metaphor for people who are on the threshold of conversion and need to be handled very sensitively. (White, Clergy, 65+yrs)

The metaphor of the glass doors became powerfully analogous with respondents who said that they felt overwhelmed at the prospect of simply entering a Catholic church in the early stages of spiritual awakening. This finding has significant implications for the New Evangelisation envisioned by St John Paul II and in the tone and vision of the document of the Second Vatican Council, speaking of the adoption of a radical, receptive, missionary approach amidst a secular culture (RM 3; GS 59; EG 27-33).

A priest who had become Catholic through the Ordinariate echoed the need for adult initiation to reflect and account for the spectrum of Christian knowledge of belief and practice, whilst also being sensitive to the cultural needs of the community. In embracing what he termed a 'radical' mindset, he described the decidedly organic process of creating an initiation programme which would be appropriate for the spectrum of contemporary religious experience,

Uh, I think sometimes I've encountered some of the diocesan way of thinking in that everyone that comes forward knows nothing about the faith. So if I have somebody who really did know nothing, I might do a bit more but my experience is that often we're getting people who do understand the Christian faith quite a lot. What they need is kind of an understanding of the Catholic culture. So I think 12 to 14 weeks is about right.

(White, clergy, 36-50yrs)

This priest demonstrated a willingness to adapt his strategic style according to the needs of different groups and individuals coming forward for conversion each year. A consistent finding amongst this group of clergy was an insightful ability to read and interpret the cultural context of their parish and wider community (Flannery, 1975; Pope Paul VI, 1965; Pope Francis, 2013).

A priest in a busy South London parish said he felt it was imperative to be truthful and consistent with the parishioners and those in the community. He explained the elements which he felt drew people to the parish,

it's about what you say that catches them. First of all, it's about the homily, it must be straightforward and open, just speak to people's situation, like here, I don't mince my words and some people might come and see me and say that I'm too blunt. My philosophy is, if the Scripture does not affect our lives, then there are two things involved, either the Scripture is useless or we are useless and obviously Scripture cannot be useless so the problem is with us and we must work on ourselves. (Black African, clergy, 36-50yrs)

Serving a large Nigerian community, the priest said that when he arrived in the parish, he noticed certain behaviours that indicated some parishioners may not in fact be fully initiated into the church but were still coming forward to receive Holy Communion. After careful consideration, he addressed this issue during Mass the following week and received an angry response from some parishioners, who said they would leave the church. He said he rarely compromised on telling people the truth in discussions and felt that maintaining a sense of integrity and consistency left the door open for those who wished to return. The priest explained the benefits of adopting this open and receptive style within his parish community,

maybe then it makes people come forward and say, 'well I want to do this right, I want to get things straight, how am I going about this?' (Black African, clergy, 36-50yrs)



This was a powerful account of a priest who genuinely met people when they were in life and then helped them to address personal situations which had prevented them from being fully received into the Catholic faith. Hornsby-Smith asserts that the style of the parish priest has changed significantly over the past 40 years; he suggests that priests have moved from being closed to change, authoritarian and superior to mission focused, open to change, democratic and collaborative and this was certainly born out in the findings of this research (Hornsby-Smith 1989:204).

### **7.2.3 Concentrated/Personalistic style**

Rambo mentions the impact that a leader who is particularly charismatic, can have on a potential convert (1993:79). In terms of evaluating what personal characteristics actually constitute 'charisma', it is important to emphasise at this stage that those members of the clergy who were mentioned as strong role models and who had successfully fostered close connections with people seeking to become Catholic, displayed similar approaches but diverse personality traits.

Interviews in which the priest was mentioned as a central figure, had a strong theme of relationship and inter-personal connection which was established quickly. In terms of strategy, it was clear that the priest had seized opportunities to establish a connection with people by initiating conversation when finding them in the church, visiting them at home or cultivating friendships in their place of work. Callum, who had been exploring Catholicism at the chaplaincy department at University, decided to visit the local Catholic church when he returned home for the Easter holidays and described the sequence of events which took place once he met the parish priest,

when I went back home for Easter I had looked to see what the, kind of, local Catholic church was like and so I that's where I met Father, he has been incredibly helpful, you know, really solid guy....and I think he's really been a kind of spiritual father yeah....he's been proving to me that, you know, it's not just me,

I'm not mad, I think we've got quite similar personalities actually. (White, male, 18-25yrs)

For Callum, the establishment of a strong, supportive relationship with the priest seemed to provide a source of reassurance, support and a sense of validation relating to his early religious experiences. Finding resonance with his parish priest was an important outcome for Callum, and during his interview he frequently referred to the priest as 'spiritual father'; mention of shared personality traits and characteristics seemed to confirm his sense of being on the right path and provided a sense of emotional gratification.

The role and character of the parish priest was a particularly strong theme for respondents with little to no religious background or knowledge of Catholic practice. For several respondents, the interpersonal connection with the parish priest was an uplifting presence in their lives and many revealed their newly found friendships with a sense of pride and admiration. Max explained the importance of his parish priest in assisting him with his faith journey,

He is a phenomenal man and awesome at what he does and the care he gives to every single word, prayer, speech, really, on each stage of my journey. He took my hand once and said 'Look, I will lead you on this journey as safely as I possibly can'. It makes me amazed that I'm still on this journey and coming out of it, I've got a priest....as a friend. (White, male, 36-50yrs)

Having already established the key significance of inter-personal bonds in triggering spiritual awakening (Lofland & Starke, 1965; Lofland & Skonovd 1981; Starke & Finke 2000:117, Bruce 2014:15), these findings revealed that the role of the priest at this early stage represents a tangible demonstration of relationship building and the practical cultivation of early faith. Hornsby-Smith is keen to emphasise however the loss of vast numbers of priests over the past thirty years, the 'greying' priesthood and the increasing

numbers of priestless parishes which is now becoming a reality. He notes that priests are experiencing increasing demands on their time in the face of expectations for consultation and lay participation (1999:16). The role of the priest therefore in contemporary culture is not an easy one to manage.

#### **7.2.4 Modes of contact: Discovering RCIA**

By far, the most frequent way in which respondents made contact in the early stages of religious enquiry was by contacting the parish priest directly. Of the total number of respondents interviewed, eighteen people contacted the priest often via email, telephone call and in one case by letter, whilst four people contacted the RCIA coordinator first.

Interestingly, three of the group described themselves as 'Nones' and were those who engaged in the most thorough internet searches. It is important to highlight that this initial process in and of itself was not always easy, natural or quick. The 'internet' group spent a great deal of their time searching for a Catholic church and trying to establish which church would be 'local' to them (one's 'local' parish is perfectly clear once familiarity creeps in and with knowledge of walking distance but for many people, an internet search rarely affords this level of familiarity). Helen, a young mother in her early twenties, describes enlisting the help of a friend in this preliminary stage,

I found the RCIA group online. Me and my friend, we both used to work at the Catholic school that linked with the church....She's doing it with me at the moment. So we just looked together and saw the details and contacted [RCIA Coordinator] then. Yeah, we just went from there. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

For more and more people in contemporary culture, the internet is the first port of call for information; in practical terms, since the respondents at this stage were not formally linked in with the parish community, the prospect of entering a church building, whether local or not to find out more information or to pick up flyers which many parishes display in church vestibules, was remote. For some respondents, the parish

website became the window into the parish community and in essence created a crucial first impression which would determine whether they selected the parish to pursue their religious journey. Tristan describes his own initial impressions of the church, when asked how he had made first contact,

I came across the concept of RCIA more generally and I started to search for where would be the place to go, so I did some searching and I discerned that the kind of spirituality that they were showing was similar to my background, I felt that...the sorts of issues and concerns that they were debating on their website, I could relate to, although technically, I'm not in their parish. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

For respondents with existing knowledge of Christian practice, making contact with the parish office to find out how to become Catholic was a more fluid inclination. As a result of talking about their desire to become Catholic in daily conversation, respondents would report being given the parish newsletter in which details of the RCIA were given, or in some cases referring them to the RCIA coordinator directly. For these people, the RCIA coordinator or team member with whom they had developed the strongest relationship was mentioned frequently throughout the interview, often becoming an important role model and close friend.

### **7.2.5 Parish selection**

The process of parish selection was, for many people, a haphazard one and this had broader implications further down the religious journey, which justifies brief mention at this stage. In this early stage of encounter, few respondents were familiar with the catechetical route to become Catholic and even fewer were familiar with the acronym 'RCIA'. Where people had a genuine desire to become Catholic and little idea how to progress, they would often travel to parishes recommended by their friends. People found themselves linked to a church which was some distance from their homes and this later impacted attendance at catechesis classes and regular Mass attendance. Despite

having to travel thirty minutes by bus, Mia described her reasons for selecting the church where she later embarked on the RCIA,

I didn't know any Catholic churches nearby, Trinity church but I couldn't go because I was working and so I asked someone who I worked with and she said 'ok, I know one you could try' and when I came here I was really at ease and so I started to come here. (Black African, female, 26-35yrs)

Mia later mentioned that the reason she liked the church was largely because of the warmth and kind demeanour of the parish priest, and this was echoed throughout other interviewees from this parish group. The findings reflected that the parameters used by the respondents to select the parish within which to pursue the route to Catholicism, were less to do with location or geography and more with relationship development, either virtually or in person. Issues of structural availability therefore became less important for people engaged in the early phase of encounter, whilst issues of inter-connecting bonds, attachments and new networks were found to be key motivational factors. This theme is echoed strongly throughout this chapter and reinforces the literature around attachment theory undergirding religious change (Stark et al, 1965, Lofland & Skonovd, 1981).

#### **7.2.6 The role of the parish priest in early encounter**

At the threshold of encounter, whilst some people had found information on the internet relating to adult initiation and the RCIA, few respondents were aware of the catechetical pathways through which they would become Catholic. Significantly, the actual mechanics of the process at this stage seemed almost irrelevant for many people; the goal of first contact was to express their religious thoughts and feelings out loud, to give them a voice and to do this with someone who would provide guidance and understanding.

Lydia had decided she wanted to find out more about becoming Catholic following the death of her mother and her experience of attending her funeral Mass. Lydia regularly visited the church in the weeks after her mother's death, 'to sit and think', and said that around this time, she had begun to experience a desire to attend Mass. Lydia said that she felt uncomfortable about the prospect of attending Mass without prior discussion with the parish priest and the issue of an invitation or permission to attend. It was on one occasion of visiting the church that Lydia met the parish priest,

one day I just happened to meet Father and I really wanted to come to Mass, but to find out, to experience it again, but I wasn't sure I'd be allowed because, you know, I was a non-Catholic at that point. I wasn't sure he'd be happy, but he said, 'no of course, come along and see what you think. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

What is evident from Lydia's experience is a secular perspective of exclusion and seclusion of Catholic practice from the wider culture; it was perhaps the dispelling of such a perception that for many respondents, secured them to progress to the next phase of catechesis in the parish. In reflecting on the events which caused her to attend RCIA, Lydia recalled the significance for her of meeting the parish priest in the way she did, 'I think I probably would just have gone the only other way if I hadn't met Father that day'.

More than one respondent spoke of the serendipitous sequence of early events which had taken place during the enquiry stage, the opportunistic nature of which seemed to operate almost as validation of their developing religious journey. Peter had little knowledge of English Catholicism but had been to Mass with his partner when visiting relatives in Poland but presumed it would be the same in his local parish church. Peter attended Mass one weekend and was so deeply affected by the homily given by the parish priest, that he wrote him an extensive letter explaining his desire to become

Catholic and asked for guidance. In the interview, Peter summarised the gist of the letter,

I said, look, I'm really, I'm interested in being a Christian, I want to be in relationship with Jesus. And I just feel really strongly, I want to join the church. I want to come into the church. Well how, how do I go about it? You know, what do I need to do? (White, male, 36-50yrs)

Having sent the letter to the local parish priest, Peter described attending Mass the following week, when during the notices at the end of the service, the parish RCIA Coordinator made an appeal to the congregation. Peter's account of this moment very much highlights the cumulative effect of evangelistic outreach measures which can intersect positively at times, bringing about the 'right place, right time' effect in practice,

So the following week I go on Sunday and [RCIA Coordinator] is there and she stands up at the end of church and says – 'anyone wanting to come this year?' This wasn't planned for me. It was just, that's the time that she goes up and asks – 'anyone interested in coming into the church?' She said 'We're starting RCIA in a few weeks time and if you'd like to register, register.' I was like, wow, this is just... it's all happening at once. It's getting crazy. (White, male, 36-50yrs)

Peter's account very neatly highlights the way in which during the Encounter stage, the relationships made with the priest and the RCIA coordinator or team have an important role in helping make the transition from private to public faith. For many respondents, ease of communication, reassurance, support and the provision of a safe place to speak openly about their new religious feelings, had a validating and confirmatory effect. People frequently reported feeling elated after their first formal encounter and this confirms Rambo's observation that there is enormous potential for emotional gratification at this very early stage (1993:83).

### 7.2.7 Benefits of conversion.

In the search for meaning, Rambo suggests that individuals on the peripheries of conversion receive gratification at this stage of early encounter in a number of distinctive ways. For many people, the first meeting with a priest or member of the religious community will bring emotional gratification in the form of a sense of community, of belonging and of understanding. The creation of new relationships can bring feelings of positivity and excitement and the introduction to a new religious framework can also bring feelings of cognitive and spiritual stimulation and of hope for the future. Ullman summarises the benefits of a new religious option, 'The myths, rituals, and symbols of religion can infuse life with intensity, drama and significance, offering many people a deep sense of affective gratification' (quoted in Rambo:83).

There are strong connections with the literature around the importance of invitation during the Period of Evangelisation and Pre-catechumenate stage of the RCIA (RCIA, 36). For inquirers, they are invited to begin a spiritual journey in which the worshipping community plays an integral role. The feelings of elation and positivity mentioned by respondents resonate with St Cyril's original impetus behind the provision of a global catechesis for adult initiation, which would be instrumental in causing elements of spiritual transformation to 'explode' within the heart of the neophyte (Vatican, 2007).

Lydia recounted the sense of emotional gratification she felt at the start of her religious journey, having disclosed her feelings and experiences to the parish priest,

I don't know that many people in the church, but I feel that I belong to something. And I think that was the other thing about mum dying because we moved here in 1974. So I very much felt that me being here was because she was here and when she died, coming to church made me feel like there's another reason for me to be here. (White, female, 51-65yrs)



The impact of establishing interpersonal bonds with an advocate or member of the religious community cannot be understated. For many people, simply knowing that they are cared for and loved unconditionally can bring with it profound feelings of acceptance and connection with the other person. This helps to explain why the priest plays such a vital, early role in people's conversion narratives as the first person whom the seeker encounters and who is credited with the animation of their nascent faith journey.

Individuals embarking on the RCIA journey begin their journey via the Period of Evangelisation and Pre-catechumenate and are initially referred to known as Inquirers, The church is offering here an invitation to initial conversion. There is no obligation involved during this period. 'It is a time of evangelization: faithfully and constantly the living God is proclaimed and Jesus Christ who he has sent for the salvation of all. (RCIA, 36)

Having established a desire to know more and to continue their RCIA journey, Inquirers will celebrate the rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens (RCIA, 41 – 47). The new Catechumens will be assigned a sponsor, generally selected from the worshipping community, to accompany and guide them on their journey. The combined rite makes provision for baptised (Candidates) and un baptised inquirers (Catechumens), and will take place amongst the worshipping community, as a way of publicly marking entrance to the second step – the Period of the Catechumenate (RCIA,75-80). The RCIA stipulates this as a time for continuing to build community within the group, becoming more involved in parish activities and familiar with the

parish community, learning about the basic teachings and beliefs of the Catholic Church and exploring important and foundational Scripture passages.

### **7.2.8 Techniques for living.**

In addition to a sense of emotional gratification that people experience during their first encounter, the advocate is credited with providing guidance, direction and support regarding the next steps in the faith journey. Classes are suggested, or even more powerfully, one to one instruction which offers the individual complete undivided attention, time and focus. Within the RCIA, inquirers who have celebrated the rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens (RCIA, 41-47), will be assigned a sponsor, generally selected from the worshipping community, to accompany and guide them on their journey.

Rambo suggests that for many people, the structure and intricacies of religious practice can provide a much-needed framework for living which people find attractive. He asserts that many people desire religion in their lives but are unaware of the ways in which to initiate themselves within a particular tradition. He suggests, 'Methods of prayer, meditation, scripture reading and interpretation, and other practice steps for making life different are very appealing to a potential convert' (p84) For many respondents, the parish priest fulfilled this vital instructional role.

Mark's first encounter with his parish priest was during RCIA classes, when he credits him with passing on the 'mechanics' of faith. In Mark's interview, the Sacrament of Reconciliation featured heavily and it was very clear that the parish priest had illuminated a teaching which had been on the periphery of Mark's doctrinal understanding. Mark spoke directly about the benefits which the sacrament has conferred on him,

Now I understand what that's about, so you're really not offered it in the Protestant framework, and it's a key sacrament that had robbed the ability for me to connect with my ever sinning soul and have some redemption and that is basically what Christ suffered for, His whole mission. Yeah?...otherwise, you sort of walk around with your conscience being your guide. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

What Mark describes is a new way of understanding church teaching, which he can apply to everyday life, within a cohesive value system which is comfortable and meaningful. Several respondents referred to the sacrament of Reconciliation with gentle fondness, a sense of relief and accompanying feelings of peace. Mia spoke about the positive emotions which had emerged for her regarding this sacrament,

before my first confession I was thinking, 'is the priest going to judge me?'...I concentrated on myself, my fears, but when I came out I felt wonderful.. I was more confident about what I should do and I found it amazing, I found it .....confession made me feel content. (Black African, female, 26-35yrs)

Mia was one of many respondents who mentioned the Rosary in their interviews. This will be discussed later in much more depth but in the realms of the role of the priest, people expressed a strong desire to learn how to pray the Rosary, to learn its significance; there was almost an impatience to have the mystery surrounding this popular and ancient devotion revealed, since for many people, the Rosary was intricately linked to Catholic identity. The priest was perceived as one of a few key members of the church community who could explain, teach and guide them in learning this devotion. For Mia, the priest represented a valve or conduit to a channel of communication, an access route to the divine, the transcendent God which had not been present before,

Like the Our Father....like the Rosary, Father explained that there is a lot of repetition and it's almost like, if you don't know how to pray, the Rosary is like a guide because, you know, if you have followed all the lines, you have prayed, it gives you confidence, I feel as if now I can talk to God all the time, in the middle of the day I finding myself sitting and talking to God. (Black African, female, 26-35yrs)

The benefits of receiving a religious framework relating to belief and practice seemed to provide a stable structure and a noticeable sense of excitement about learning the central tenets of Catholicism. It was the combination of emotional gratification mediated through numerous beneficial outcomes from the encounter experience, that propelled people to consider the next stage of Interaction.

The fourth stage of Encounter saw the emergence of the Experimental motif in several accounts (1981:378); the instructional nature of this stage paves the way for people who may be trying out the new religious option, imbuing life with a new layer of significance and structure which was previously absent. The toolkit of religious practices offers the potential convert ways in which they can access transcendence in their lives. Rambo asserts that the power of divine connection can be the ultimate attraction which propels and encourages the spiritual seeker to continue along their spiritual journey (1993:87).

### **7.2.9 Catholic practice: A system of meaning**

Rambo suggests that religions offer systems of meaning which serve to incentivise people on the pathway to conversion and that the advocate's role in providing these incentives is strategic (1993:87-92). Ultimately, when the individual makes the first steps toward encounter, they are given a coherent religious framework which provides the gateway towards that which they are seeking – meaning, belonging, structure, transcendence and which provide them with a sense of gratification. As Rambo asserts, 'Understanding the human predicament and the origin and destiny of the world is a powerful incentive for people to convert'. (1993:92)

There are important echoes at this stage with Lofland and Stark's 'value added' model which explored the volitional aspect of choosing a new religious option, whilst recognising the presence of predispositional or situational elements which may undergird or 'push' a person to the next step (Lofland & Stark 1965:863; Richardson 1985:168). Drawing on the seven factors of Lofland and Stark's funnel analogy, during the point of initial encounter, respondents displayed a receptivity, a willingness to embrace the culture, practice and the 'mechanics' of the Catholic faith, which the authors recognised in the early phases of religious change.

The excitement and enthusiasm to learn more within an already initiated search for meaning, meant that for these respondents, the new Catholic framework had been validated and provided a credible next step after spiritual awakening has been sparked (Barker, 1984). Stromberg makes a fascinating point about the congruence that takes place between the individual's own life story and emerging resonance with elements of the religious story, in what he calls 'impression points' (Stromberg: 1985:59; Rambo, 1993:83). As Stromberg draws on the originating work of Wilhelm Dilthey, he asserts this to be the moment when the relationship between the symbol and the self, merge as a physical experience of the symbol and serves to solidify commitment going forward. The impression point is thus defined as the moment when, 'a complex phenomenon becomes a graspable, coherent unity to the perceiver' (Stromberg 1985:59).

The potential convert experiences a new understanding of what has been previously familiar but not resonant and as such, the individual injects an 'infusion of subjectivity' into the new knowledge. Stromberg describes an interview with a Swedish Protestant group member as part of research he conducted in the later 1970's. In describing the respondent's literal interpretation to Biblical passages in relation to his everyday circumstances, problems or dilemmas, Stromberg observes that religious faith cannot be

reduced to abstract understanding of symbol. The man in question applies Scripture directly to his problems, receives guidance in the form of specific passages which 'come to him' and he makes very practical life decisions based on these foundations (1985:63).

It was illuminating to discover a direct parallel with the conversion account of Peter, who felt drawn to make key life changes after his first encounter at Catholic Mass.

Having admitted that his faith 'slipped away' during early adulthood, Peter reflected on his former city career in IT. He recounted being a very 'worldly person' at the time and enjoyed a life which comprised drinking, parties and the pursuit of money.

Following the breakdown of his relationship, Peter began to attend daily morning mass at the local Catholic church. Peter began to re-evaluate his life choices and could see the inconsistency of his current lifestyle going forward, not only in terms of his personal faith journey but the resulting impact of his life with his daughter as a single parent.

Peter described the gradual process of spiritual discernment which began to take place as he developed a new routine of attending Mass daily,

but then I was kind of thinking, well actually I don't like this whole city lifestyle... it was very brutal. It was kind of all about how much money you can earn, where you can get to, by who you know, what lies you can say. It was as if Jesus was saying to me, this is wrong and you don't have to take part in it. And I didn't. I was like, 'okay'. (White, male, 36-50yrs)

Peter went on to describe the ways in which he felt God was changing his life, one step at a time, removing the barriers and obstacles which had initially presented, until his new life was unrecognisable from the old. Peter finally found a part time job as a baker, moved to a smaller house which meant he eradicated his debts and found enough time for his daughter and his new faith. Peter reflected back his first encounter at Catholic Mass and the dramatic impact it had on his life,

I remember thinking, 'I've got this horrible, tragic life and I'm trying to change it'. And Jesus actually had words of advice that I was hearing at Mass or reading in

the new Testament and it's all in my prayers and Jesus is saying, 'look, why don't you do this?...God will look after you, you know, just think of God, don't think of anything else'. And I did. (White, male, 36-50yrs)

Like Peter, for many people the 'impression point' moment during initial encounter caused a moment of connection which seemed to fuse significant events in their own lives, with nostalgic memories of loved ones and the inter-personal bonds made with the priest or members of the church community; several respondents said that it was at these moments, that they felt they had found their spiritual home and accessed a profound sense of meaning.

#### **7.2.10 Belonging**

In terms of emotional gratification, finding a sense of belonging was a dominant theme throughout the interviews and particularly heightened during the early stages of encounter.

For Frida, a full-time single parent, who had always wanted to become Catholic, her desire to become part of one of the Women's groups in the church community was a dominant theme running through her interview. She found the support that the women gave each other through social media forums extremely attractive and spoke with excitement at the prospect of being able to wear a distinctive 'uniform' once she became Catholic. Frida's whole demeanour became illuminated when she spoke about the group and she showed me a picture of her with the group on her phone as she talked,

I just love everything about being Catholic! I spoke to the lady, one of the leaders here and I said 'I want to join the meeting' and I asked, 'am I going to have this wrap?' [clothing] [The leader explained that] they enrol people in...October, so it's a bit challenging because I have to wait... I said, 'I want to join because I love serving God with all my heart'. (Black African, female, 36-50yrs)

For Frida, the wrap symbolised both her membership and identity within the group; she explained that she had already given the leader the money required, in anticipation of

being received into the church and then to the group. Frida received a great deal of support from other group members, with whom she communicated via a social media group. Frida's experience speaks to the power of the collective identity of the new religious community and its ability to engender and cultivate feelings of belonging (Day, 2013). The desire to wear distinctive symbolic clothing, combined with being included in various social communication channels displays almost a tribal expression of shared religiosity (Tyler, 1871; Durkheim, 1995).

#### **7.2.11 Building a Catholic identity: Understanding the benefits, attractions and accommodations involved in becoming Catholic.**

Rambo asserts that there are a range of benefits conferred when people join a new religious group, which are sufficiently attractive to sustain and nourish the spiritual journey. Encounter was a particularly fruitful time for people, as it marked the beginning of a more intense period of engagement and immersion in church teaching and practice; marking an important stage when people begin to cultivate an authentic essence of what it meant to be Catholic and to establish a new religious identity. The following discussion identifies the most significant areas of Catholicism which most attracted people and relatedly, seeks to present the building blocks which were foundational in helping people to craft a new religious identity.

#### **7.2.12 Richness and heritage**

When reflecting on the reasons people had decided to become Catholic, the spiritual and historical heritage of the Church was mentioned frequently in interviews. People often used the words 'depth' and 'richness' to describe Church tradition and whilst many people acknowledged the many turbulent episodes throughout the church's history, its continued survival provided a key source of reassurance and a sense of security.



For many people who had begun to study the Catechism, they discovered the extensive historical and intellectual tradition of the church and the Church Fathers, from whom early church teaching and dogma emerged. The heritage and patrimony of the church represented a central source of authority, and it was mention of this solid, consistent doctrinal framework which engendered trust and confidence. As Tristan perceptively explains,

I started thinking about who has the authority to define Truth, to dogmatise...well actually Jesus did promise that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church and that he would be with the church and he would help the church to define good doctrine and so I started to find many of these answers within the Catholic church. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

In many cases, being aware of the church's heritage helped people to validate their final decision over denominational change or to end their religious search when they had previously displayed patterns of religious switching. One young father who was insightfully aware of the secularising effect of modern culture on children and their development, was strongly attracted by the unwavering emphasis on the Gospel message which he had seen evidenced in Catholic teaching and practice, from his wife and children who were attending Catholic school. He explained,

I was reading Scripture and had a clear understanding of the 'undiluted Gospel' which taught selflessness and love towards the needy and the homeless. This was especially attractive to me.. in terms of raising them in a faith. (Black African, male, 36-50yrs)

Hornsby-Smith suggests that whilst it is possible to view the deeply embedded Catholic culture as 'sectarian and suffocating' it is also one which is protective, nourishing and reassuringly persistent. He asserts this as being a necessary condition within which the intellectual and cultural dominance of English Catholicism can flourish (quoted in Harris 2013:37)

### 7.2.13 Sacraments

The sacraments of Reconciliation (also referred to as Confession) and Holy Eucharist as celebrated within the Mass were the two strongest themes of Catholicism mentioned in interviews as being especially attractive. Whilst anecdotally, many born Catholics have diverse perceptions and experiences of receiving Confession as children, both positive and negative, for those interviewed, Reconciliation was seen an important spiritual tool for life to obtain internal peace and provided a framework for forgiveness which was attributed uniquely to the Catholic faith. Mark describes the change in his own perceptions of Confession throughout his journey to become Catholic,

I was always very poo poohy about Confession, very mistrustful, but um, now I understand what that's about. So you're really not offered it in the Protestant framework, and its a key sacrament that had robbed the ability for me to connect with my ever sinning soul and have some redemption and that is basically what Christ suffered for, His whole mission. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

Mark was particularly eloquent at describing the framework of Catholic tradition, which he referred to as the 'mechanics' or 'machinery' of the faith; for Mark this represented a gateway to understanding more fully and internalising the mystery of God. For one Catholic lady who had grown away from the church and sought to intensify her faith, she described the way in which Reconciliation served as a doorway back to faith. Having been encouraged to receive the sacrament by her local Catholic priest, she describes the way in which this sacrament operated in her life,

I explained [to my priest] that I felt sinful for all the years I had not been practising my faith, and he suggested that I participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I felt renewed as a result and began to come back to Mass afterwards, my faith deepened from that point on. (Black African, female, 36-50yrs)

Many respondents had begun to adopt a regular practice of Mass attendance, on Sundays and weekdays and with this regularity of attendance came an accompanying

and growing desire to receive the Eucharist. As someone who experienced a great deal of anxiety and indecision over becoming Catholic, it was a moment whilst attending Mass just before Easter that made Lydia appreciate how much she wanted to receive the Eucharist and as such, clarified the final decision and commitment to become Catholic. She explained,

when it came to it I thought, 'I don't want to delay this' you know? I really wanted to, um, become a fully paid up member of the church because I wanted to be able to take communion and that was a really big deal for me. Yeah. And I wanted to feel, that I really fully experience what that means....um,yeah,,,for my own spiritual wellbeing. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

In contrast to expressions of broad desire to receive the Eucharist, others gave a more theological explanation of the Transubstantive nature of the Eucharist. In the following quotation, Tristan refers to an interpretation by Kreeft, a Catholic convert whose theological insights illuminated the faith for him,

although obviously I can't receive Communion, that sense of the Real Presence of Christ is a big draw...Peter Kreeft (he's been really important to me) says that communion is to the Catholic what sex is to marriage, you know, you're talking about that level of intimacy and uh, uh, and it's shocking when you hear that. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

In discussions about attending Catholic Mass, much was made about the mode of worship which people felt was distinctively Catholic and this operated in both a positive and negative way. Peter describes the elements of the Mass which attracted him the most,

When I attended Catholic church with my partner at the time, it matched my definition of what religion was meant to be about - the mode of worship was simpler and I sensed a serenity with God. (White, male,36-50yrs)

A strong theme emerged regarding the consistency of practice and experiential familiarity which meant that Mass in the Catholic tradition was distinctive and easily recognisable. An elderly, former Anglican respondent, described a sense of pleasure

and satisfaction when he attended a Mass in a Belgian church, finding that the language barrier made little difference to his understanding. He explained,

It's the authority, it's order and wherever you go in England, it's the same mass. Even when I was in Belgium... it was plainly obvious, with the bells and everything, what was happening. (White, male, 65+yrs)

For many respondents, familiarity with the Catholic style of worship conveyed feelings of serenity and peace. For respondents coming across from the Anglican tradition however, contrasting styles of worship were mentioned as potential areas of deficiency, which although distinctively Catholic, they felt they had to be accommodated.

When Tristan first began to attend Mass before becoming Catholic, he admitted to feeling shocked at the lack of apparent joy and enthusiasm displayed by the community of parishioners who Tristan suggested light-heartedly could come across as 'miserable'. He expressed a sense of confusion as to why he and his wife would be amongst only a small number of parishioners singing the Gloria with proud exuberance; for Tristan this observation caused a slight anxiety over his own sense of 'fit' within the church and which would only be later resolved when he participated in various parish initiatives which aligned with a more charismatic style of worship.

For others, the challenges experienced in learning to navigate their own participation in the Mass highlighted some deeper assumptions within the Church around accessibility and welcome. Anne, a young Russian woman with a strong desire to become Catholic, raised an issue regarding the challenges to becoming Catholic which were echoed heavily in the longitudinal reflections. In her interview, Anne said that she was finding it challenging to become familiar with the celebration of the Mass. It caused her anxiety to feel that she might behave differently than the other parishioners and that this would draw people's attention. As a result, she tried extremely hard to learn the core prayers

said in the Mass so that the whole process would feel more natural and comfortable. In recounting her difficulties in trying to understand the intricacies of the Rosary, Anne made the following comment,

And another thing, uh, in the mass cards or mass books, there is no Hail Mary. There is no text of Hail Mary inside, I've been to many Catholic churches when we travelled around, in none of them... was the text of Hail Mary. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

As a new Catholic, John was tasked with assisting his pupils in reading at school Masses and he conveyed the vicarious levels of anxiety that he experienced when preparing his students. He explained,

the bidding prayers, you know? [I tell them to] lead into the Hail Mary and that child reading them has to hope that everyone will join in, because he doesn't know the rest, its only the first line written down, Hail Mary dot dot dot. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

In an exploratory exercise, upon entering my own parish church, I discovered an abbreviated version of the Mass on the sheet in the entrance: the entrance antiphon, the Collect, the Creed, the Gloria, the Communion Antiphon and the Sunday readings – no immediately accessible text of the Our Father or the Hail Mary. Granted, the Hymnal and the Parish Mass book contained the Hail Mary in full but would take some time, and familiarity to find. This early finding highlighted a pertinent issue around the presumption of knowledge and experience around Catholic teaching and practice, which can present as tangible barriers to people interested in Catholicism.

An Anglican married couple described the ecclesial accommodations which had taken place since the Second Vatican Council, which they felt had adversely affected the traditional style of worship in the Catholic tradition. Music was an element of the Mass which they felt had been particularly affected and they recognised a move away from a more traditional choral style towards a more diverse, multi-cultural musical landscape.

For this couple, traditional Catholic music encapsulated amongst other elements, the beauty of the tradition and they expressed a sense of accommodation in finding an appropriate church which would register with the specific Catholic identity they sought in the move to being received fully into the church. They explained,

I don't know how long ago we said to ourselves that we would end up Catholic and I said, if we do, I think we will have to move to a Cathedral town because that would be the only place where we could expect decent worship. (White, female, 65+yrs)

The expectation of a high standard of liturgy and music as part of the traditional cathedral offering is supported by Bowman who refers to the professional daily choir performances of Vespers and Solemn Mass as one of Westminster Cathedral's key attractions. Bowman suggests that the experience of hearing a cathedral choir and the resulting spiritual atmosphere, has been cited as a factor in many conversion narratives. Mass attendance figures point towards a general increase in both real terms and against total Mass-goers, and a modest increase over the last decade (2019:312,313). Hornsby-Smith connotes the liturgical loss both aural and visual which has taken place over the last fifty years; he laments the disappearance of what he terms the 'glories of the old liturgy, the sequences, hymns and canticles of transcendent beauty.'(1999:37-39).

The sense of accommodation expressed by several Anglicans in the process of becoming Catholic was interesting and in many ways underscored the solidity of their commitment to the Catholic faith. There were clearly several discrepancies in style of worship which although of vital significance to their personal religious practice, presented as minor problems to overcome rather than serious barriers to being Catholic long term. It was possible to detect that such issues had been carefully considered and thought through. Tristan eloquently describes the process of rationalisation that enabled

him to accept the style of traditional Catholic worship in contrast to his own charismatic practice,

there's a lot of froth in, in what we do. And you know, although it's very engaging and very vibrant... our emotions are very, very easily engaged. You know, our heads are very easily turned by emotive things and so I'm prepared to accept that some of that isn't terribly substantive. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

Tristan's conclusion revealed an appreciation that the emotional arousal experienced during the Anglican worship he was used to, was distinctive of a specific denominational style. He recognised that the characteristic solemnity of a Catholic community during Mass in many ways expressed a depth of reverence and engagement which is no less present but often presents in an austere manner to those looking in from outside.

#### **7.2.14 Devotion to Mary through the Rosary**

Devotion to Mary was one of the dominant themes running through the interviews and one which respondents associated as being distinctively Catholic and which had been a strong source of attraction to the faith. The Rosary was mentioned in every interview conducted and many respondents mentioned pilgrimages to places such as Lourdes or Medjugorje, as great sources of spiritual strength and pivotal moments in their journeys to becoming Catholic.

Formal catechesis through the RCIA or one to one catechesis with the parish priest had allowed people to better understand the Church's devotion to Mary as 'Mother of God', intrinsic to Christian worship and which differs essentially from adoration and worship of God, the Son and Holy Spirit (CCC, 971). Anglican respondents were careful to reference their own work in unpicking many widely held Protestant claims of Mariolatry – a view developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries by Protestant groups who believed that Catholics and Lutherans venerated Mary in the extreme, thereby crossing into the territory of idolatry (Schaff, 1907:411,422; Hurley, 1963:212-13). Whether

respondents came to formal catechesis with preconceptions over the position of Mary in the church, or had no prior knowledge, the interviews revealed a keen eagerness to uncover the mystery of the Rosary and to incorporate into their personal prayer life. The first interview conducted for the research was with Robin, a young man in his late twenties who entered the room wearing a large set of Rosary beads. His devotion to Mary had emerged during the RCIA process, in which Marian theology had been covered early on in the sequence of classes. Robin felt a special connection to Mary and had embraced the Rosary in his personal prayer life and in his evangelistic mission; he carried a bag of rosaries with him in daily life and would speak to people about the power of the Rosary if asked. In addition, Robin had developed a very close relationship with one of the older ladies in the parish communities, who had guided Robin in his journey and became a significant role model. Through this friendship, Robin had been encouraged to attend a youth pilgrimage to Medjugorje, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Medjugorje is an unofficial Catholic pilgrimage site since 1981, when the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared. Robin was deeply affected by the impact of this visit, which gave him a deeper understanding of salvation and heaven, in addition to the sense of peace and security which he experienced from the global Catholic community he encountered there. He explained,

Medjugorje, it's like a taste of heaven on earth because everyone's Christian and there were so many devout Catholics there so everyone really cares about going to Mass and about praying and that's beautiful. You could feel the Spirit in the atmosphere, it really is amazing, and my faith only strengthened at that point onwards. (White, male, 26-35 yrs)

Robin's allegiance with the Rosary as a young adult resonated with early memories of seeing his grandmother praying this devotion and this was a recurring theme amongst other respondents. Either seeing family members praying the Rosary or finding Rosary beads belonging to close family members seemed to create an affective link and a strong



sense of curiosity to explore the mysteries of a prayer practice, which many saw as a key component of Catholic identity.

Frida explained how the attraction for the Rosary grew after seeing others praying in this way,

I just love it, I saw people using it and I wanted to know more about it, because I knew, that Rosary belonged to Catholics. I want to know how to use it to pray, especially for my children. (Black African, female, 36-50yrs)

Respondents revered the ancient heritage of the Rosary, expressing an awareness of the need to hand down the method from generation to generation and to see value in the inherent structure of the mysteries. Whilst many perceived the Rosary to be complex, requiring specific tuition and explanation, they also seemed to appreciate the structure of prayers which people felt were thorough and comprehensive; Robin reflected that he received reassurance from the knowledge that in reciting all the mysteries, 'you've covered everything'. Mia recalled the instruction received from her parish priest,

in the Rosary, Father explained that there is a lot of repetition and it's almost like, if you don't know how to pray, the Rosary is like a guide because you know if you have followed all the lines, you have prayed, it gives you confidence. (Black African, female, 26-35yrs)

The perceived complexity of learning the Rosary represented a source of anxiety for many people. Witnessing church groups reciting the Rosary together caused some respondents to feel uncomfortable, worried and in many ways excluded from the community. In her follow-up interview, Lydia reflected that she often felt confused when hearing groups pray the Rosary and concerned that she would never pick it up. In this respect, Lydia suggested that having a prayer partner for neophytes who would accompany and guide them through the practical reality of praying the Rosary in public, would be helpful. As with the experience of attending Catholic Mass, the desire to

participate is frequently compelling but the practical reality of participation can often be a daunting, lonely experience.

It was clear from the testimony of each respondent, that the Rosary represented a key component of Catholic identity and that there was recognisable power and mystery in the structure and discipline of praying in this way. This finding strongly resonates with Hornsby-Smith's study of English Catholics, for whom this was described as 'part of the Catholic package' and 'a mark of denominational distinctiveness and a domestically apprehended piety' (quoted in Harris 2013:136)

During one Saturday morning RCIA class to which I had kindly been invited, one of the eight people present announced that she was going on pilgrimage to Medjugorje and almost every member of the group asked if she would bring a set of Rosary beads back for them. A Portuguese lady who was attending with her son, explained that whilst being raised Muslim in Portugal, she had been aware of Catholicism and had observed people praying with the Rosary, which had sparked questions within her. She explained that when she moved to England with her family of eight, they had very little and their accommodation was poor. Having been given a Rosary, she said she began to pray to 'Mother Mary' to help her' and after eight months she described being given a beautiful house to which she referred as a 'mansion'. The house had enough space for everyone and the quality of life for her entire family improved dramatically; she attributed this good fortune to the intercessory power of Mary and decided to become Catholic.

In many ways, these findings speak to the scholarship observing the need to recapture specific characteristics of devotional life and the importance they play in attracting people to the Catholic faith. In particular, Litvack's work on Irish Catholic vernacular hymns (1996) and Heimann's work 'Catholic Devotion in Victorian England (1995) are of interest here; these works by non-Catholic scholars highlight the significance of an

entire aspect of Catholic culture which has been quite recently lost (Hornsby-Smith and Lee 1979: 33). Harris's work very much undergirds this finding in her work evaluating what she terms the 'little appreciated' elements of English Catholic culture, the popular religiosity which takes place at grass roots level and which carries enormous significance and meaning for people in the process of building a new Catholic identity (2013:3).

#### **7.2.15 Conclusion - Encounter**

In the process of exploring the initial stages of Encounter, there was considerable resonance with the major factors identified through Rambo's fourth stage, relating specifically to the advocate's style and mode of contact with the Church. The clergy interviewed were found to adopt an active missionary style, displaying an openness and adaptability to the cultural context in which they found themselves and in response to the needs of people seeking to become Catholic. The role of relationship building was found to play a crucial factor in helping people to feel nurtured and supported in their spiritual journey.

For people seeking to become Catholic with some knowledge of the Christian faith, the main point of first contact was directly with the priest, who met with them and directed them either to formal catechesis or a one-to-one approach. For the 'Nones' or those unfamiliar with religious practice, the main source of discovery regarding parish selection was through an internet search and was found to be haphazard and often, unnecessarily complicated. People often selected the parish at which they would proceed with their spiritual journey, based on word-of-mouth recommendations or positive impressions of parish websites rather than geographical distance. In many accounts, people's first, positive encounter with the parish priest was regarded as

providential or 'lucky' and reinforced the fact that the availability of the priest is crucial and a pivotal factor in many accounts of religious journey.

At the point of encounter, there are a number of positive benefits which serve to validate and nourish people's spiritual journey. Many people experience significant emotional gratification after first meeting the parish priest, and in response to the establishment of a new social network through the RCIA group or community. The parish priest was found to play a key role in transmitting various techniques for living or as one respondent described, the 'mechanics' of faith through Catholic practices and beliefs.

At the point of encounter, people often relayed feelings of excitement at the prospect of learning the intricacies of the faith. These findings provided a valuable window into the basic attraction toward Catholicism, the components of which were also found to be linked to developing a Catholic identity. These included the richness and heritage of the Church, the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist in particular and the devotion of the Rosary, mentioned in every interview conducted.

Rambo's fifth stage of Interaction was helpful in providing a lens through which to explore the respondents' formal relationship with the Church as part of the process of adult initiation. Having already gained insight into the motivational factors which undergirded respondents' journey of early spiritual awakening, this stage facilitated many insights into the intricacies of adult initiation, the key role of relationships and an evaluation of the space between the ideal and the reality.

### 7.3 Stage Five: Interaction

<i>Encapsulation</i>
<b>RCIA</b>
Sphere of Change
Physical
Social
Ideological
<i>Relationships</i>
<i>Kinship</i>
<i>Friendship</i>
Leadership
<i>Disciple/teacher</i>
<i>Rituals – choreography of the soul</i>
Deconstruction
Reconstruction
Rhetoric-systems of interpretation
Attribution
<i>Modes of understanding</i>
<i>Role – reciprocal expectations and conduct</i>
Self and God
Self and others
<i>Experimental motif</i>
<b>Key:</b>
<i>Areas of resonance – italicised</i>
<b>Areas of divergence – bold.</b>

Figure 17: Stage Five 'Interaction'

#### 7.3.1 Introduction

Within the parameters of Rambo's fifth stage of Interaction, the emergent themes presented a comprehensive picture of the process of formal engagement in the process of adult initiation, from the perspective of both the convert and the advocate (1993:102-123). The role of relationships was found to be dominant and varied extensively in terms of expectations, roles and accommodation. Four major types of relationships were identified and categorised as (1) reciprocity between advocate and convert, (2)

cultivation of closeness and spiritual intimacy facilitated in the one-to-one approach with the parish priest, (3) negotiation of loaded expectations between converts and catechists and resonance with the gap between the ideal and the lived reality of adult initiation (Yamane, 2014:91).

### **7.3.2 Encapsulation**

Following the initial period of encounter, the relationship between the advocate and the potential convert develops and grows, often becoming more structured through a programme of formal instruction. For religious groups and communities, during the next phase of interaction, potential converts will be schooled in the teachings of the belief system through a process called encapsulation. Encapsulation is a term which describes the process of separation from the wider community in order to impart new knowledge in a way that can be structured and controlled, it is the creation of a social bubble of intense knowledge transfer. The concept of encapsulation was developed by Arthur Griel and David Rudy to describe a sphere of influence or matrix in which 4 processes operate: relationships, rituals, rhetoric and roles (2007:260-78; see also Rambo, 1993:102).

Rambo suggests that the conversion motifs used by the religious group, organisation or community will determine how strict the process of encapsulation will be and the degree of social pressure applied. He makes the point that religious organisations that accommodate the Intellectual, Mystical, Experimental motifs employ a lower level of encapsulation than those that use the Affectional, Revivalist or Coercive models, where the degree of social pressure is high (1993:105). The positioning of the Affectional model here is contentious since Lofland and Skonovd cite one of the defining characteristics of this motif as a medium level of social pressure, with positive, gentle

affective content and so it is possible to assert that the affectional motif could also be included within a loose model of encapsulation.

The foundations for the encapsulation model employed most frequently for conversions to the Catholic church can be found within the RCIA – a structured approach to formal catechesis for adult initiation. The RCIA is a particularly good example of Griel and Rudy’s encapsulation model since it is characterised by a process which successfully incorporates all four of the processes into the religious journey of the potential convert, recognising and harnessing the inherent strengths that each one brings. The RCIA model typically operates in a group setting and, depending on the size of the group will include enquirers, leaders, catechists and often recent converts who attend as part of the mystagogical process following their own reception into the church (RCIA, 64-244).

In the first place therefore, the potential convert is presented with the opportunity to build a new network of relationships with people who contribute a breadth of experience into the conversion process and with whom the individual can bond. Rambo asserts that the role of friendship and kinship is crucially important in the process of religious conversion since people look to others for validation, for trustworthiness and source reliability (1993:103-108). There is visible recognition that if the religious option is right for a close friend or family member, then the choice is ‘right’ overall.

The difficulties experienced by respondents in selecting appropriate parishes became clear early on in the research process and challenged an initial assumption that all parishes use the RCIA as standard in relation to adult initiation. The findings revealed a number of parishes across the Archdiocese who chose not to use the RCIA for adult initiation; the following two reasons were cited most frequently for not using the RCIA – lack of sufficient numbers coming forward to support running the course and

reservations from clergy about the suitability of the rite itself. For these clergy, concerns about the RCIA related to rigidity and inflexibility, particularly in relation to the baptised and those with an already established knowledge of Christianity from other denominations. One member of the clergy who routinely adopted a one-to-one approach to catechesis felt that the one-size-fits-all model of RCIA was unsuitable for the broad spectrum of people seeking initiation. He reflected, ‘...trying to force people into the sausage machine of RCIA is a mistake’ (White, clergy, 65+yrs)

As discussed in Chapter Three, originally the RCIA was established to provide a gradual, structured process of religious development for those who had not been baptised and had little existing knowledge of Christianity. The reality of the situation for many churches however, is that RCIA classes are often attended by catechumens and candidates and that the two groups have very different requirements; it is indeed a tall order for the RCIA, in its current format, to fulfil the needs for all people along the spectrum.

### **7.3.3 How parishes approached adult initiation**

What became evident from both the initial responses received from parishes declining to participate and those who took part in the research, was a diverse range of approaches adopted by parishes across Southwark Archdiocese, implemented to account for the spectrum of religious experience which typify contemporary religious seekers. Three parishes offered a ‘one to one’ approach involving preparation directly through the parish priest, eight parishes ran RCIA classes for both candidates and catechumens and finally, three parishes incorporated a panoply of shorter, evangelisation ‘experience’ programmes which preceded alternative catechetical programmes. This finding concurs with Yamane’s assertion that parishes must adapt and tailor their formation approach to address the needs of those from a wide religious spectrum and is reflective



of a wider recognition within the church for the need for inculturation (Yamane, 2014; EN 20, RM 3).

The range of alternative programmes mentioned were Alpha (both the original and Catholic adapted course) (Gumbel, 2021), Evangelium (Holden, 2012) (course book accompanied by video walk through of resource materials), Discovering Christ series (Christlife, 2021) and ‘Why?’ DVD series (Pinsent & Holden, 2012). Several clergy members reported great success with shorter programmes, which often lasted between 6-14 weeks, in contrast with the September to April model adopted in the RCIA process. The success of these models seemed to comprise a familiar model of group formation: a shared meal, staged input of resource material through video presentation, small group discussion and a final coming together at the end. With programmes such as Alpha and Discovering Christ, explicit focus was placed on thorough catechetical formation and the encouragement to emerge as missionary disciples, spreading the Good News and thus completing the conversion cycle.

#### **7.3.4 Relationships**

#### **7.3.5 One to One catechesis – convert and parish priest**

For seven respondents interviewed, five of whom were becoming Catholic through the Ordinariate, one to one catechesis was offered by the parish priest. When interviewed, the clergy running one-to-one catechesis suggested that this occurred more often as a result of a staggered influx of people wanting to become Catholic, who approached the parish throughout the year and therefore missed opportunities to join group sessions. For all the respondents who engaged in this type of catechesis, their response to this style of catechesis was overwhelmingly positive. They seemed to delight in having exclusive access to the priest, to have the opportunity to bond and to develop a growing relationship with him as they progressed within their spiritual journey. The priest gave

them a catechetical resource to read privately at home and they would attend as many sessions as were deemed necessary before both parties felt that it was the right time to be received into the Church. Callum, a young man who had decided to become Catholic whilst attending university, describes his experience of one-to-one catechesis,

we kind of had one-to-one sessions like every week and I'd go to his house and we'd have coffee and biscuits, and you know, yeah it was all very good. So yeah, I found that incredibly helpful. I think personally, I tend to get a lot more, you know, out of one to one yeah as opposed to being in like a group. (White, male, 18-25yrs)

For Callum, the formation of a solid friendship with his parish priest, whom he referred to as his 'spiritual father', became an instrumental factor in helping him to develop his identity as a Catholic and to develop a strong network of positive Catholic role models. When interviewed, the priest said that there would often be several people being prepared to become Catholic at vastly different stages of catechesis and in Callum's case, it became a happy coincidence that his initiation happened at Easter, a time when many Catholics are traditionally received into the church. A respondent who had been catechised in a one-to-one format, suggested that there was an element of comfort and security in this approach which he did not think would be present in a group setting. He explains,

initially there were two of us, but the other person dropped out, however in a larger group I could see there maybe being some insecurity about the knowledge of the Catholic faith which wouldn't be there in a one to one setting... I'm not sure I would have liked that if it was on offer, the meetings with Fr, they were 100% the best thing. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

When discussing one-to-one approaches with clergy and respondents, it became clear that both parties liked the flexible nature of this style of interaction, which often became a sharing faith discussion, and provided opportunities to ask and answer questions as they arose. One priest said that he had to remain open and responsive to people who

expressed a desire to become Catholic and would often tailor their meetings to fit around their personal circumstances. For one woman who had approached him for preparation to be received into the church, the priest said she was fairly well catechised at the time of approaching him and they met a few times out in the community, (once at a bus stop on her way to work) before he decided she was ready to be received the following week. The entire process took only a few weeks in total. John describes the process of encapsulation which followed his initial encounter with the parish priest,

you rock up to Mass one week and speak to the guy at the end...um, and say, well I'm trying to do this..anyways, uh, he was very good and said, 'let's have a chat', which we did and again, there was no pressure at all, which was nice. We just went through what I had experienced many years ago and that was my choice, and he said well it could take two months, six months, a year, whatever .That experience was very nice... you could enjoy it as a process and it was very much pitched for today's society. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

In general, respondents seemed to regard this approach as fitting and appropriate for modern culture, largely because it was flexible and adaptable to people's needs but moreover, because it was relational.

### **7.3.6 RCIA – a complex relationship**

Contrasted with the largely positive reactions of those who engaged in one-to-one catechesis with the parish priest, the practical reality of both delivering and participating in the RCIA was complicated and in many ways more emotionally charged. The findings revealed a strong distinction between catechumens and candidates in relation to the ways in which they received and experienced RCIA; correspondingly the dynamics of relationships taking place in each group presented in very different ways. The following discussion looks at the RCIA from three perspectives: catechumens, candidates and the parish teams in charge of delivering and implementing the RCIA.

### 7.3.7 Catechumens and the 'Nones'

For the small number of unbaptised respondents and those with nominal religious background, the RCIA experience was overwhelmingly positive. Although some catechumens were surprised at the extended timeframe of the RCIA, many felt that this gave them adequate preparation time and notice. On reflection, respondents looked back at the structure of the course with fondness and a sense of security. Although Helen felt that the structure of the rite was initially complicated, she felt reassured having received a thorough explanation by her RCIA leaders and felt this provided an appropriate timeframe within which to absorb all the elements of Catholic teaching and practice,

I did think it'd be very quick. Um, I didn't realize it was such a long process, but I'm glad it is because... I didn't want to just be thrown into the deep end and be baptised and that would be it, and then just be left to go on my merry way and learn things myself. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

For the unbaptised or those with no religious upbringing, the momentous nature of the decision to become Catholic was countered and eased by the year-long timeframe for RCIA. Although Anne had already been baptised Russian Orthodox, she had no memory of religion; since there was initially no opportunity for her to attend RCIA in her parish, her parish priest suggested that she could obtain special permission from the Bishop to speed up her initiation into the church. Interestingly, Anne expressed concern at the thought that she would not be adequately prepared for reception into the church. She explained,

the bishop said, 'she doesn't need to do a course. She can just go for it'. But I don't feel comfortable with it because I don't feel like I understand the things that are done differently in the Catholic church....So I feel the need to do this course. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

It became clear that amongst the younger cohort of respondents, there was a deeply held sense of responsibility about attending and completing formal catechesis. Both Richardson and Yamane contend that for people who make a volitional choice toward religion, the new religious pathway is regarded as especially treasured and precious (Richardson 1985:163-179; Yamane 2014:3,7). This was reflected through respondents' reverence for the sacramental pathway to become Catholic and a deep respect for the development of faith, within an ordered, structured process.

The development of new relationships, with like-minded people and the creation of new social networks for many people brought a level of stimulation, satisfaction and positive emotion which represented a nurturing influence during their faith journey (Lofland & Stark 1965:375; Barker 1984; Smith 2003:64; Everton 2018:94). Helen described her own feelings when joining the RCIA group,

when you come into the group, you just get a sense of relief and you could just sit down and they're so welcoming and I'm learning so much and I can ask any questions and we can contradict each other and we've all got very strong opinions. So, um, yeah. Well I like that, that feel. Um, and that we're all in it together. You know, you're not alone doing it as well. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

Following discussions with his partner about the Catholic faith, Max's partner Mary suggested he attend one of the RCIA classes as a first step to learning more. Max admitted that he had reservations and doubts as to his suitability for the classes. In describing his own internal questioning, it was possible to infer some degree of working through what a faith identity might look like for him going forward,

I never thought I would ever be in a situation where I was going to church everyday, and to be fair on the first day I went to the class I thought 'is this going to be for me? Is this something I will be able to apprehend? Is this something I will be able to do? (White, male, 36-50yrs)

Max's reaction to attending the first RCIA class was profound and moved him from a position of gentle interest to complete commitment to becoming Catholic in the space of

one evening. He spoke in terms of ‘falling in love’ with the Catholic faith, and his experiences of embarking on a spiritual journey which was ‘emotional’, ‘incredible’ and ‘beautiful’. On several occasions, Max mentioned his own pursuit of happiness and that of those around him. He explained his reaction at the first RCIA class,

it was the care of the other people who have been part of the church for a long time, that gave me a boost, because I was like 'hold on a minute, they all look happy, Mary looks happy, I want a bit of happiness in my life. I was a bit selfish in a way I suppose because I thought why should all those people have that happiness and not me? And then I went for the course and it changed the whole outlook of my life completely. (White, male, 36-50yrs)

Max’s experience perfectly encapsulates the Affectional motif in operation and reinforces the impact that positive observation of religiosity can bring for a person who then seeks to adopt the benefits for themselves (Lofland, Sknonovd 1981:380; Bromley & Shupe 1979:170; Bruce 2014:15,16; Rambo 1993:60).

Feelings of acceptance and belonging mentioned by Helen and Max were echoed by Lydia, for whom the group served as a supportive framework for her developing faith journey, which was far from straightforward. Despite Lydia’s decision to become Catholic after her mother’s death, Lydia struggled with the immensity of the decision, of her own feelings of insecurity about what becoming Catholic would mean for her and whether in fact she would be a ‘good enough’ Catholic. She frequently oscillated between feelings of spiritual consolation, progression and doubt. For Lydia, the support of the RCIA coordinator became integral in helping her to navigate her spiritual and emotional journey. When asked to reflect on the experience of attending the RCIA group, Lydia expressed a powerful sense of acceptance within the group,

I just feel like it's somewhere that, um, you know, is prepared to welcome me in and, um, and I do feel supported and I, you know, for a long time going through the RCIA process, I remember thinking, I do, I feel held by the church... Um, and yeah, and you know, not just the church as a body, but by my kind of developing faith, in God. (female, 51-65yrs)

The spectrum of religious knowledge in Christianity was particularly diverse and as such, the RCIA has a wide remit, to accommodate people with little, some or no prior knowledge of Christianity. That said, some respondents were particularly sensitive to distinguishing characteristics within the group, which highlighted the variety of starting points and needs. Anne, had been encouraged to attend a DVD series called ‘Why?’ over several weeks at her parish before beginning RCIA. Anne had waited over a year to begin the process of becoming Catholic and was eager to begin formal catechesis; in the interview it was possible to detect a sense of restlessness, bordering low level impatience at having to attend the pre-catechesis course, which she admitted she did not need. She explained,

Uh, but to be fair, I think that bit of the course is more for people who are not sure if they wanted to do it. And it's helpful to understand, okay, do you want to make this step or, oh no, maybe I don't. While for me, I was definitely sure I wanted to convert. It was just the, the need to find how can they do it. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

For Anne, her desire to learn about Catholic teaching was rivalled by her keenness to soak up the essence of Catholic identity and practice and she admitted that this was facilitated by the group setting and feeling comfortable to ask questions. It was significant however that Anne highlighted her own levels of comfort were determined largely by knowing that others in the group were in a similar position to her.

Anxiety around specific elements of Catholic practice during Mass was a particularly strong theme with respondents in this category and approaching these matters within the security of a group was key in allaying anxiety and feelings of exclusion. Helen, a young mother with nominal religious experience eloquently described her own feelings when she attended Catholic Mass for the first time,

I remember my first ever Catholic mass and people giving each other the sign of the peace. And I thought, ‘what do I do here?’ And everyone started shaking

hands. I thought, 'Do I do it or not? Do you wait for someone to approach you? Everyone knows what to say. Everyone knows when to kneel, when to stand, when to sit. Um, there was just so much to learn and as a non Catholic, you're a bit like 'well should I join in or not? (White, female, 18-25yrs)

For Helen and Anne, it is possible to hear the sense of overwhelm and worry regarding their own personal abilities to absorb the cultural and practical constituents of Catholicism. Reassuringly, it was the solid foundation of the RCIA group which provided a sense of security to ask questions and a strong source of friendship, support and guidance regarding the practical aspects of Catholicism (RCIA, 1985).

For Peter, it was key that those wanting to become Catholic could see RCIA leaders with a similar profile, background and level of experience of the secular world in order to transmit the faith in a fresh and contextual way. Peter spoke candidly about the stark contrast between the approach of cradle Catholics, transmitting faith which has been embodied and practised for a lifetime, to people for whom faith is newly acquired and radical. This speaks strongly to Bruce's contention that people need to see likeness and familiarity in the demography of those transmitting faith (2015:16). The following account by Peter demonstrates how a lack of familiarity and common ground with catechists can become jarring and in many ways a barrier to faith transmission. He explains,

...you know, it's not perfect. Um, the leaders don't represent the whole spectrum....All the leaders are pensioners or nearly pensioners...most of them are cradle Catholics and the into the community style of church, whether they're part of the community already and they offer RCIA as part of their service to the community. Yes, they have that, but it's not this burning new faith that's found every day, it's not on the edge. (White, male, 36-50yrs)

For catechumens and those with little religious upbringing, the network of new relationships developed through the RCIA group was crucial in providing a safe, secure space in which they could explore their newly emerging religious identity and they



seemed to gain massive support from journeying with others who were on a similar spiritual pathway. Whilst it was important to draw from the experience of experienced Catholics so that people could learn how to be Catholic, Peter's insight demonstrates that for catechumens, their ability to identify with recent 'new Catholics' became a key building block in developing their Catholic identity. Being able to identify similarity therefore clearly operates within the microcosmic group dynamic, as well as it does at a broader, societal level. For this group, the relationships between themselves and the catechists was largely compliant, in keeping with the teacher/disciple model (Rambo, 1993:113).

### **7.3.8 Candidates**

For respondents who had already been baptised within another Christian denomination, the response to attending RCIA group session was mixed. Whilst there was a general acceptance of the benefits of joining a group within the worshipping community to facilitate and encourage discussion, the prevailing comments reflected a sense of going through the motions to re-connect to Christian teaching with which they already felt familiar. On a structural level, respondents in this category often reacted against the yearly timeframe of the RCIA and frequently questioned whether this lengthy process was necessary for them. Tom, an elderly Anglican gentleman who had been attending both a local Catholic church and an Anglican church, describes his response to being informed of the structure of RCIA classes,

I wanted to just have a one-off discussion but found I'd unwittingly signed up for 20-30 sessions and I panicked and got off the boat. But I come here regularly every Saturday for Mass and so then the next year, when they started talking about it again, I thought ok well I might as well go for it. (White, male, 65+yrs)

Many Anglicans felt that their Scriptural and theological understanding equalled, if not surpassed the level at which RCIA classes were delivered. This practical realisation

generated feelings of mild frustration, surprise and a range of assumptions about perceived levels of religious knowledge and fluency and ultimately about the credibility of those tasked with faith transmission. An Ordinariate member of the clergy elucidated the implications for RCIA groups having to accommodate people from different Christian denominations,

this meant that people were genuinely not equipped to mentor the newcomers and the newcomers often knew more than the cradle Catholics and that was embarrassing on both sides of that equation. (White, clergy, 36-50yrs)

This was a strong theme for many Anglicans seeking to join the Catholic church and on many levels, seems to highlight the range of different needs and appetites for those from different religious backgrounds and the inability for a single pathway such as RCIA to meet the needs of all. One Anglican suggested that the pace of RCIA was ‘pedestrian’ and that whilst providing a wonderful opportunity to come together as a community, to discuss and share spiritual experience, for him the RCIA occupied a peripheral role in his faith journey. He described how RCIA served to augment rather than feature centrally within his own self-initiated studies,

I would say the bulk of my catechesis is coming from, from the external sources, and it's being supplemented by RCIA rather than the other way around. Um, and that's not to do it down at all. No, no, no. It's just that, you know, frankly, if you meet once a week during term times, there's not a huge amount of ground you can cover. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

The findings showed clearly that the experience of attending RCIA for those with existing knowledge of Christianity was diverse and often negatively toned.

Relationships with RCIA teams tended towards a fractiousness which stemmed from a sense of spiritually treading water, of ‘going through the motions’ in advance of their ultimate goal of initiation. Relationships between candidates and catechists therefore were more complicated than with the catechumens, reflecting not necessarily any

paucity in the delivery of the RCIA but rather, a set of spiritual needs and appetites which were not being fed through existing formation.

### **7.3.9 RCIA as a relationship of negotiation and bargaining**

In practice, the implementation and delivery of the RCIA varied significantly between parishes in response to fluctuating numbers annually and the cultural characteristics of each area. For the eight participating parishes who used the RCIA, groups fluctuated in size with the largest numbers seen in urban parishes, situated in the more densely populated areas of South London. For these parishes, meetings would be scheduled to take place on Saturday mornings or weekday evenings and numbers would fluctuate greatly in response to work schedules and childcare arrangements.

Two RCIA parish groups located in the South West of the Archdiocese comprised older adults, aged 65yrs and over and for these groups, meetings would often take place after morning Mass during the weekday since all members of the group were retired. For parishes with RCIA groups where numbers were small, the team comprised an RCIA coordinator and the parish priest. In parishes where numbers were larger, additional catechists were on hand and these were often people who had been recently received into the church.

A parish priest of a bustling urban parish in South London, who had led a large RCIA group in the previous year, explained that he had only had two people come forward that year. He explained their reactions when he discussed the commitment required for RCIA,

This year only one or two persons came forward, and we talked about the RCIA class and when they heard how long the sessions went on for, they said they couldn't commit. Sometimes they have difficulties with the church and the length of time but as I told them, 'you don't have difficulties out there when they tell you have to go through different stages to get a passport for example' ....[today]

people think 'nothing should take this long' but the trouble is that you come out half baked. (Black African, clergy, 36-50yrs)

There was a palpable feeling of tension between attempting to deliver the rite in the way that it was originally envisioned whilst also mediating factors such as low numbers, poor attendance and dropouts. Fr A felt that weekly classes should be longer, ideally around two hours in order to adequately cover the material and he said he would have loved to be able to extend the overall length of RCIA to last a full year. Whilst aware of the time pressures imposed on people in today's fast-paced society, he felt strongly that there should be no room for compromise regarding the core topics to cover. He explained,

We need more time, you need catechesis for one year. Now lessons are one hour, by the time you get here its 10 minutes past, how can you learn anything in 50 minutes? If you water down the teaching, then you will lose them. That's why you need people who will say to them, 'this is it and if it's still here after all this time, then it's because it is Truth'. If you water it down, what's the hope for today? (Black African, clergy, 36-50yrs)

Importantly, the priest said that he always began RCIA by distributing blank sheets of paper and asked that people write down any questions they had for him, with no barriers and no issues off limits. He assured them that he would answer everything that had to ask him and used this as a framework for the order of topics he would cover in the adult initiation course for that year. In many ways, this approach echoed the mindset of the previous clergy members who had adapted their own programmes for adult catechesis in response to the needs of the individuals in their care.

Four RCIA catechists were keen to share their experiences and opinions after RCIA meetings had concluded and two agreed to participate in longer interviews. Common themes focused on respondents' own stories and personal journeys which had led them to become involved with RCIA; issues emerged relating to flexibility, commitment and

negotiation regarding course requirements and their own desire to collaborate with other RCIA catechists to share experience and best practice (Yamane, 2014:91).

In general, catechists seemed to find the negotiation and bargaining with potential seekers challenging in relation to the requirements and commitments regarding the RCIA course. Catechists would often report feeling disappointed when people failed to attend consistently. Major issues of contention surrounded the overall length of the course, which many people seemed to find prohibitively long and the requirements to attend all the sessions in the programme. Despite the challenges, those interviewed displayed understanding and compassion for the personal situations of those desiring to become Catholic. One catechist explained,

It is a long programme, I do understand..their situation, I remember before I was retired, when working in hospital, your bosses, you have to let them know in time, because they can't let everyone have the same day off at a time. I understand those people because I was never a Monday to Friday worker, so when they tell me, I encourage them, its not because they don't want to [attend], its because their work situation won't let them.. (Black, African, female, 65+yrs)

In these cases, catechists said they tried extremely hard to accommodate people in their personal situations and would frequently offer additional time slots and opportunities to catch-up for those who were struggling with attendance and juggling personal commitments.

Significantly, catechists expressed a desire to meet with others involved in running RCIA courses, to share experiences, be a source of support and to exchange areas of best practice. One catechist spoke about his reaction when seeing RCIA mentioned in neighbouring parishes, '...sometimes I read through their newsletters...and wish I could go to one of their sessions to see how they do things and learn from them' (Asian, male, 65+yrs)

Many cited ideas and suggestions they had been considering for ways in which they could develop and improve the RCIA experience; not only did this indicate a deep commitment and enthusiasm for the catechetical task assigned to them, but also flagged up a potential need for peer support mechanisms which could be incorporated into RCIA preparation and training programmes.

#### **7.3.10 Rites**

As discussed in the second chapter, the RCIA has been referred to as a model or school for catechesis since it adopts a staged approach toward spiritual transformation, providing a structure within which conversion progresses spiritually and within which each stage is marked by distinctive ritual celebration, which takes place in the heart of the worshipping community (Yamane, 2014:91). As affirmed through the work of Victor Turner and David Yamane, it has been found that ritual serves to communicate faith on a level which moves beyond the cognitive, often involving movement of the body and incorporating the senses in a way that conveys knowledge in an embodied form (Yamane, 2014:40). As Rambo contends, ‘Attitudes towards life, other people, the world, and God are informed by the power of ritual in the life of the convert’ (1993:115).

For Catechumens, unbaptised respondents and those with little religious background, the sequence of rites within the RCIA were referred to more frequently compared to Candidates. When ritual celebrations took place during Mass, within the heart of the community and then subsequently in the Cathedral, this conveyed for many people the magnitude and drama of their decision to become Catholic and for most, this was regarded positively. When Helen spoke about her reception in the church, it was possible to detect how effective these rites were as markers, to punctuate and signify her progression. She expressed her own sense of journey as she approached the final steps,

I've had my rights to welcome and next, I think it's the right of election at the cathedral. Um, that is in March. I'm not sure of the exact date...Um, I know that's at the Cathedral in Elephant and Castle. Yeah. And then Easter vigil will be the day of everything. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

Max spoke with a sense of euphoria and elation about his religious journey and he highlighted the Rite of Election as a moment of connection and profound significance in his religious transformation. For Max the symbolism of taking a further step to become one of the worshipping Catholic community by signing the Book of the Elect served as a powerful outward signal. He describes his attendance at this ritual celebration,

Me and [partner] were at the Rite to Elect and I had to sign the Elect and she said a beautiful thing – ‘now you and my Mum are both connected’...I never met her Mum,..never spoke to her face to face and when she said that I thought that was a beautiful moment right there. (White, male, 36-50yrs)

Only one respondent said that they felt constrained by the structure of the RCIA process and this was largely due to unresolved emotions of how and if they should proceed with their journey in the timeframe suggested. Lydia, who admitted to struggling with internalising her developing Catholic faith and identity, felt an additional sense of pressure when the subject of attending the Cathedral for the Rite of Election and reception at the Easter Vigil was raised during RCIA classes. Despite a growing sense of anxiety around formal reception into the church, Lydia found that having received support and reassurance from the RCIA coordinator and close friends, the prospect of the sacramental celebration at Easter in fact crystallised her intentions and confirmed her initial desire to become Catholic. She explained the moment of insight which took place just before her reception at Easter,

I was so anxious about.. well was I doing it for the wrong reasons? But actually when it comes to the crunch and we got to the Easter Vigil... I just thought, this is what I want. This is really what I want. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

In relation to the conversion motifs, the role that ritual plays in the conversion journey becomes especially significant when considering the belief-participation sequence in relation to the Experimental and Affectional motifs (Lofland, Skonovd; 1981:378-80). In both these typologies, the potential convert is physically trying out the new religious option before concrete rationalisation of the belief system takes place. Whilst there may be early inklings of belief, participation becomes the primary mode through which the potential convert engages and through which the channel of belief is forged through repetition and reinforcement. In addition to the four periods and three steps which comprise the main RCIA journey, potential converts are strongly encouraged to regularly attend Mass, to observe the celebration of the Eucharist and to engage in a regular prayer practice in the lead up to receiving the sacraments of initiation. As discussed in Chapter 2, the use of such rituals serves to continually reinforce and internalise the tenets of the faith communicated through the medium of symbol and sacrament whilst elevating the drama and significance of the religious steps being taken (Shaughnessy 1985:58; Rambo 1993:129, Grimes 2002:3; Yamane, 2014:91).

Parishes who adopted a one-to-one approach to catechesis or variable structure often retained more flexibility over when and how to receive people into the church. Olivia was an elderly lady who had decided to become Catholic at the age of 79 years after a long process of internal deliberation; the parish priest at her local Catholic church celebrated her reception into the church as part of a special Mass for her. Olivia displayed a great deal of confidence and self-assurance over becoming Catholic, it was clear that the decision was hers alone to make and there was a sense of certainty about her choice which was independent of the opinions, perceptions and views of family and friends. Once the subject arose of Olivia's reception into the church however, there was a deeply held significance to the service for her initiation held at the church, and the



attendance of her family. When asked if she was received with others, she described the significance of Mass in greater depth,

No it was just me, Fr held a service and my family came, it was beautiful and my husband came. It was part of the Mass, [I was received at the time] when he was to give his sermon. I get more now from coming to Mass here than I ever did before, to meeting people and having that shared focus of God and Jesus, I don't know why it was different before but it just was, it is. (White, female, 65+yrs)

It became evident that for Olivia, her reception Mass into the church stood as an important marker for the future embodiment and practice of her faith. She describes her weekly experience of Mass being different from that point onwards and served to demonstrate the internal symbolism of ritual, which can communicate at a level beyond the cerebral and the cognitive; this possibly explains why so many people can sense an internal shift or change at this point but find it so difficult to put into words.

### **7.3.11 Rhetoric**

A central role of the encapsulating process relates to the process of rhetoric, a style of language which is designed to be persuasive and expressive of the process of religious transformation. Rambo suggests that very often, once incorporated into the framework of a new religious group, potential converts will often change their language as they proceed through the conversion process. In many cases, the religious group provides expressive phrases, terminology and reference points which assist the convert to interpret and conceptualise their own religious experience. The central theology of Catholic conversion centres on the redemptive power of Jesus through his life, death and resurrection; concepts of death and rebirth become powerful symbols for the convert's journey. Metzner asserts the inherent power in the language of metaphor in crafting new consciousness in the process of religious transformation (quoted in Rambo 1993:120). In the same way that symbol forms the basis for the 'impression point' to occur, so metaphor can operate as a mechanism for attribution, enabling people to see

connection, significance and meaning in the events which happen in their lives, particularly those which take place in parallel to their spiritual journey.

The use of new religious terminology and language was most noticeable in those with nominal religious experience and practice. Whilst for some, the illumination which had accompanied learning about doctrinal teachings of the church was evident from the fluency and enthusiasm with which they referred to subjects such as the theology of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, the Trinity and church history, for others the language which had been transmitted from RCIA classes reflected a more experiential awareness.

The term 'journey' was most commonly used amongst this group of respondents in a way that strongly conveyed a sense of self-transformation and fulfilment. People frequently referred to 'my journey' in respect of spiritual development and progress as its own entity. This was especially noticeable when people described having to steal themselves away from family or work commitments, to place their spiritual journey in the spotlight; in these cases, respondents would frequently refer to their spiritual journey in terms of being 'my time', 'time for me', 'something that is just for me' and 'mine'. For these respondents their religious development was not expressed in terms of achievement but rather as something rare, precious and delicate, requiring the same level of care, protection and nurture that a parent would afford their child (Yamane 2014:7; Richardson 1985:163-179). It is possible to hear the influence and fruits of RCIA classes and group discussion, in which the understanding of religious change in terms of a journey is used as a way of helping to internalise the structure and process which characterises the RCIA process (1985).

### 7.3.12 Roles

Many religious groups have an expectation that converts will take up the call to evangelise, to share the Good News and become missionary disciples, yet there will ultimately exist a wide spectrum of adherence to such expectations. Bromley and Shupe explored the various roles that people experiment with to evaluate the appropriateness or level of best fit of the new religious option. They suggest that for many people, there is an element of play-acting involved when joining a new group and this would certainly have particular relevance to the Experimental and affectional conversion motifs (1979, a,b). In this way, it is anticipated that ritual and symbolic action will lead the way to coherent belief. (Bromley & Shupe, 1979, a,b; Lofland and Sknonovd, 1981; Bruce, 2015).

There were a small number of respondents who had assumed strong and distinctive new roles along the pathway to becoming Catholic. Despite only being a few months into the RCIA process, Robin expressed his sense of wider mission very clearly,

Well I'm already an evangelist you know, I have a big bag of Rosary beads and if someone is interested I will give them Rosary beads and I will say to them you know 'the Lord is with you and this will protect you...read in to it, it's a very powerful thing' .... you know I've even had people ask me to go to their mother's grave with them who aren't even Catholic....people that wouldn't usually go to church, reaching out to people my age not from a background that you would generally reach out from the church. (White, male, 18-25yrs)

Robin understood his own potential to evangelise people because of his age and past life experience and saw this very much within the narrative of receiving a commission by the Holy Spirit. For many respondents, their spiritual journey through formal catechesis comprised a process of reflection, increasing knowledge and confidence in Catholic teaching and practice and a growing relationship with God. There was a tangible sense of assuming the role of student and taking time in this place, however some respondents

had clearly internalised their faith and embraced opportunities to become part of the community even before being received into the church.

Max revealed that his faith journey had prompted him to react differently to his workmates and everyday challenges and he describes his own development of a softer, more compassionate way of relating to people he once found challenging,

well at the end of the day I am a Catholic and at that point and I want to be nice to people, to care for people, like the other day we had a heart-breaking situation where one of our employers, she passed away in her sleep and was only 37 years old, but because of my faith I put my arm round my manager (everyone thinks he's a horrible man). I said 'she's gone to a better place' and before I wouldn't have had anything to say to him but because my faith has changed I felt like, 'let me comfort you for a little while'. (Male, 36-50yrs)

What is most interesting from Max's interview, was that he referred to himself as being Catholic even before being formally received into the church, implying that a feeling of belonging and Catholic identity can operate early on in the conversion process. For both Max and Robin, neither respondent conveyed 'trying on' or play-acting roles but rather conveyed a sense of belief which had become so deeply embedded early on, that psychologically, they were beginning to live as Catholics in daily life.

This finding connects strongly with Fowler's assertion that when people transition to the Individuative-Reflective stage of faith, they embark on a phase of exploration, examination and critical analysis of the defining elements of their faith identity. This sense of what Fowler terms 'self- authorisation' sees the individual embrace an explicit commitment and accountability for their faith, which resonates with the accounts of Max and Robin (1984:62). The experience of these respondents raises therefore significant issues of the mechanics and timing of formal commitment to the new religious option, which comprises the culmination of the religious journey.

### 7.3.13 The role of advocate

The theme of familiarisation with a new religious role and identity was not exclusively linked to candidates and catechumens but emerged in discussions with two RCIA catechists. Their journey to RCIA had been initiated by the parish priest who asked them to consider becoming part of the team and to help lead sessions. The catechists said that whilst they were honoured to have been asked, they did not feel worthy of the position in the early stages. A female catechist explained her decision-making process when first approached by the priest,

I used to be scared... I didn't think I was fit for that, that I was knowledgeable enough to do things like that. And then I said I would go and think about it, so it took a week and I prayed at first and I thought, 'Ok, after all I had been looking for ways to grow in faith, maybe this is what God wants me to do'...so we had the book and as we went along, [I realised] its' not just those who I tried to convert, I needed that conversion too because it helped me a great deal in my faith journey. (Black African, female catechist, 65+yrs)

Issues of worthiness and anxiety were common amongst catechists who were new to the role and this seemed to point towards potential areas of focus in the preparation and training of RCIA catechists. Whilst this initial anxiety was detectable in both catechists interviewed regarding the 'magnitude' of the task as they perceived it, they also raised similar issues about the reciprocal nature of spiritual advocacy. In the main, catechists mentioned the rewards and personal satisfaction that they received from journeying with others. They explained that they had assured enquirers that they would begin the journey of discovery together, that they themselves still had so much to learn despite being born into the Catholic faith. A catechist who had only been involved in the group for six months, explained his approach towards the RCIA resources used,

The materials that you have in the [Focus on Faith] book, although I knew to a certain extent what was involved because I've gone through it, you know.. Holy Communion...a Catholic education. Its' good to refresh yourselves, you know after 40 years, I found it exhilarating. (Asian, male, 65+yrs)

The relationship cultivated with those journeying to become Catholic was much more collaboratively toned, a ‘learning together’ type approach which is often characteristic of the advocate’s role, as opposed to adopting a strong leadership role or didactic dynamic.

#### **7.3.14 Conclusion**

This discussion has focused on stage Five of Rambo’s model, the process of formal interaction with the church in the form of adult initiation catechesis. For most respondents, their pathway of Interaction took place within the framework of the RCIA, however a smaller cohort of respondents participated in and unreservedly endorsed one-to-one catechesis with the parish priest. Whilst this often occurred in response to practical considerations, such as timing or insufficient numbers to support group sessions, many clergy (both those who participated in the research and those who declined) expressed their reservations about using the RCIA to prepare adults for reception into the church. Clergy expressed reservations on the suitability of the RCIA to accommodate the spectrum of needs of contemporary Britons seeking initiation into the church.

Significantly, the findings somewhat reinforced these concerns and reservations for certain respondents in this research. For those with little religious upbringing, the experience of attending RCIA classes was overwhelmingly positive in relation to the support and welcome offered by the new community, which in turn engendered feelings of belonging and acceptance. The impact and significance of the magnitude of the rites and rituals involved in the process of the RCIA was welcomed by this group, although at times, was found to cause anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed.

The RCIA played an extremely powerful role for respondents whose spiritual journey was categorised through the Experimental motif (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981:378). The format of group sessions and gradual introduction into the belief and practices of Catholicism allowed those who were curious and interested to explore and for whom, participation became the gateway to belief. There were several overlapping areas between the Affectional and Experimental motifs since many respondents whose spiritual awakening had been triggered through positive social bonds, then went on to 'try out' Catholicism through the RCIA before deciding whether it was an appropriate fit.

Candidates, those with an already established knowledge of Christianity belief and practice, displayed a less uniform reaction to RCIA. For Anglicans in particular, attending RCIA sessions often felt pedestrian and people said that they felt their Scriptural knowledge and understanding surpassed the pace and level at which RCIA sessions were pitched. Catechists and clergy charged with the responsibility of delivering RCIA classes, equally recognised the challenges involved in moulding the ideal of the RCIA to the needs of people for whom the timeframe and expectations of the rite were often difficult to accommodate amid the pressures of daily life. This finding seemed to emphasise the challenges involved in attempting to cater for the spectrum of religiosity which is true for contemporary Britons and recognises the need for choice and diversity within adult initiation and a rejection of a 'one-size-fits all' approach.

## 7.4 Stage Six: Commitment

Decision making Rituals
Separation
Transition
Incorporation
<i>Surrender</i>
<i>Desire</i>
Conflict
<i>'Giving In': relief and liberation</i>
Sustaining surrender
Testimony:
Biographical
Reconstruction
Integrating personal and community story
<b>Exploring the complexities of developing a Catholic identity</b>
Motivational reformation
<i>Multiple</i>
<i>Malleable</i>
<i>Interactive</i>
<i>Cumulative</i>
<b>Key:</b>
<i>Areas of resonance – italicised</i>
<b>Areas of divergence – bold.</b>

Figure 18: Stage Six 'Commitment'

The sixth stage of Commitment in Rambo's model is defined as the fulcrum point of religious change (1993:124-141). It is the time when people are placed in the final decision-making phase at a time which marks the culmination of what has often been a long journey. Since the focus of this research resides more closely with the early inklings of faith and the motivational factors which occur before the stage of formal interaction, the majority of interviews with respondents took place in the early months of the year in which they would be received into the church. For many of the respondents, having completed first wave interviews early on, their progress and development as the year progressed was largely unknown to me; upon attending the



Rite of Election at St George's Cathedral it was personally very moving to hear the names of some of the respondents interviewed being called out amongst the worshipping community, and to know that they had reached the final stages of their journey to being received into the church.

There were a small number of respondents with whom it was possible to discuss the point of formal commitment. Of those respondents who had participated in one-to-one catechesis with the parish priest, it was possible to gain a sense of their decision-making when interviews took place since the timeframe around reception into the church varied and people had often already been received between the point of first contact and the interview date. In addition, several first wave respondents had agreed to participate in follow-up interviews after approximately one year of becoming Catholic and this provided a rich source of information from a longitudinal perspective regarding the decision-making process which they recounted as part of their reflective narrative.

It was possible to infer commitment from a few accounts with respondents for whom the decision to become Catholic seemed to occur early on in the conversion process. Frida, who was so desirous to become Catholic and to be part of the community, recalled that she had paid for obligatory clothing in future anticipation of belonging to one of the women's groups closest to her heart. Max, who approached the first RCIA group with a great deal of uncertainty and doubt as to whether this new religious option was for him, experienced such a positive and affirming welcome that commitment took place immediately. He spoke with elation about his blossoming Catholic faith which was akin to the beginning of a new romantic relationship, and he frequently referred to his ensuing spiritual journey as 'falling in love' with the Catholic faith. His anticipation of becoming part of the community was palpable and much anticipated, to the degree

that he already saw himself as being Catholic months before his formal reception into the church.

Rambo asserts that for many people, commitment will take place within the process of motivational reformulation, in which the religious group or community engages with people in ways which refine, address, clarify, maintain or support the original motives which bring a person to interaction in the first place. In interviews with Anglican respondents who had decided to become Catholic in direct response to doctrinal issues relating to the ordination of women and civil partnerships, it was clear that commitment to becoming Catholic had taken place early on, between the stages of crisis and interaction. Once they had taken the decision, there was a sense of not looking back and interaction with the local parish priest had a confirmatory effect. In many ways, this supports Rambo's assertion that commitment will follow in relation to perceived advantage, such as satisfaction, benefit, fulfilment, improvement or compulsion (1993:140).

For Callum, a young man who decided to become Catholic at university, he reflected on the sense of belonging that he received in the Chaplaincy community and his growing intellectual interest and feelings of Catholic identity were confirmed when he met the local parish priest and identified a strong connection with him. The relationship served to confirm his own decision to become Catholic and reinforced his sense of fulfilment at finding a strong, Catholic community in which he felt accepted and secure.

Where it was possible to affirm commitment, most respondents expressed confidence in the decision they had taken to become Catholic, leaving only a small handful of respondents, for whom the doorway of uncertainty remained open. As a researcher, these respondents remained in the forefront of my memory for the entire year of data

collection and caused me often to ponder whether they had in fact been received into the church, whether commitment had taken place. It was always a possibility that first wave interviewees could have abandoned their religious journey, to drop out due to personal circumstances or unforeseen events, much like Frida had done in the years preceding formal catechesis in 2018/9.

#### **7.4.1 Surrender**

The sense of internal struggle, confusion and uncertainty was only present for two interviewees and happily, both respondents kindly agreed to follow-up interviews. In his first interview, Tristan a lifelong Anglican from the charismatic tradition, experienced struggle and personal trauma in the growing realisation that he wanted to become Catholic and the prospect of leaving his own church, which would continue to be attended by his wife and close friends. Rambo specifically refers to the vacillation which can occur in someone for whom the decision to convert is not always clear. Although Tristan spoke about becoming Catholic with certainty, the personal and social cost of conversion caused him to question the timeframe outlined through the RCIA group to which belonged.

As a highly self-reflective and cognisant person with a strong spiritual sense of discernment and the working of operative Grace in his life, Tristan remained sensitive to the communication of God's will in his life as a way to determine how he should proceed. He articulated a conversation with God in prayer, in which he asked for divine guidance. Tristan described the revelation of the sign he received,

[In prayer I said] 'If you want to uproot me from everything I've known, I really want to be sure this is of You'. Anyway, the next time I saw Mike he said, 'you know what, I have a picture for you...we have a plant in the garden which was really struggling, it was in this pot and I put it in a new pot and, and it has flourished.' And he said, 'I think God's saying he wants to repot to you. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

Tristan was moved by the specificity of this revelation, and by the consistent terminology and language with which he had originally petitioned God. The impact was to move Tristan from what he called a position of preference to obedience, in that moment God had become primary to his own personal preference but, the internal and personal conflict between his new faith journey and his wife, presented a significant obstacle regarding the timeframe for his reception into the church. In the rationalisation of the guidance Tristan received through his pastor, there was evidence of what Rambo identifies as surrender which can play an important role in the process of commitment. Rambo suggests that surrender is the 'giving in' or yielding to the power of the divine and that with surrender, liberation, relief and breakthrough occurs (1993:135). Rambo correctly highlights the precarious and fragile nature that can accompany the resolution of internal conflict; for many people, surrender must be reaffirmed and re-experienced as formal commitment starts to take shape.

In follow-up, Tristan disclosed that he had only told his family that he was becoming Catholic a week or two before doing so, because as he reflected, 'I guess there was still the chance for me to back out at the last minute'.

It was significant that Tristan's final months of catechesis coincided with a series of courses at the parish where he attended RCIA classes, for parishioners as part of their ongoing evangelisation programme. The courses run were 'Life in the Spirit' and the Alpha course for Catholics, which Tristan and his wife had jointly attended and within which they found fulfilment together. The importance of experiencing what Tristan termed the 'charismatic vein' of the Catholic church was sufficient to validate his final decision and bring him to commitment. For Tristan, the significance of these courses reflected facets of his own religious identity, which up until that point, he had not had

confidence that the Catholic church could support and nurture. He explained his perceptions prior to being received into the Catholic church,

seeing the parishes come alive with courses...Life in the Spirit, Alpha, they were happening when I was making that decision and that was important to me, that the church took seriously the gifts of the Spirit. I would have really struggled if I hadn't found that charismatic vein in the Catholic church, I probably wouldn't even have made the move. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

It was important that Tristan could see evidence of a charismatic element in the church, to feel accommodated and validated. Tristan's experience demonstrates very clearly that commitment to the new religious option will only take place when fulfilment, satisfaction, reassurance is provided by the group or community. Even with Tristan's self-initiated and sustained intellectual rigour, his spiritual acuity and profound allegiance with Catholicism, it was the witness of variation in styles of worship which finally caused Tristan to make the final decision to become Catholic. Without this sense of belonging, familiarity, and alignment with his new religious community, it is entirely possible that Tristan would have suspended his religious journey at this late stage. This finding highlights the recurring significance of inter-personal bonds and social networks in the late stages of religious transformation.

#### **7.4.2 Relief and liberation**

In her first interview, Lydia explained that she had begun to explore Catholicism in the midst of experiencing profound grief at the death of her mother. Her attendance at RCIA classes was constantly intermingled with feelings of desire, confusion and anxiety over her desire to become Catholic. Lydia experienced feelings of dissonance over her nascent religious identity and her daily life which she shared with her husband and children, none of whom were religious and whom she felt would not understand her spiritual journey. Lydia described her internal anguish and attempts to reconcile her existing life with a new religious identity,

I kept thinking that someone would come up behind me and say, 'excuse me, you've conned your way into the Roman Catholic church. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

In addition to a fragile and largely concealed faith journey, Lydia was still suffering profound feelings of grief from the loss of her mother and was concerned over the perceived standards and expectations held by the church for becoming Catholic. Lydia was plagued by worries that she would not be able to absorb Catholic teaching quickly enough, that she wouldn't be a 'good enough' Catholic and that her new faith was somehow not as fervent as the experience of others. For Lydia, the gentler stirrings of faith raised issues of concern over authenticity, which in many ways caused her to question the 'fit' of her new faith identity,

this is another thing that's caused me a lot of anxiety. Um, you know, I'm not kind of consumed by it and I did think if I'm going to become a Catholic, I need to be consumed by it, but I'm not. Um, and that's taken me a long time to work out in my head that I'm all right, being the way I am about it. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

The close relationship that Lydia developed with the RCIA coordinator gave her a supportive platform from which she could voice her concerns and receive reassurance. The journey to the Easter Vigil was not an easy one, and Lydia experienced similar episodes of vacillation to Tristan, in which she constantly questioned whether the decision was right for her at that time. This process of internal wrangling became heightened when considering the advancing rites and services within the RCIA timeframe. Lydia frequently spoke to the RCIA coordinator about her concerns as to whether she was becoming Catholic 'for the right reasons' and the rapidly advancing Easter Vigil at the Cathedral, brought the significance of her commitment into the spotlight. In many ways, however the structured approach of the RCIA process seemed to assist rather than disrupt her decision-making process and the sense of pressure which

could be detected in Lydia's experiences seemed to represent the fulcrum of her religious journey. She explained the point at which she made her final decision,

but actually when it came to the crunch and we got to the Easter Vigil and the other girl joined the group (she was going to become confirmed into the Church) I just thought, this is what I want. This is really what I want. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

The commitment to being received into the Church at Easter gave Lydia an overwhelming sense of relief and whilst her reaction was not encapsulated in terms of 'giving in' or surrender, there was a palpable feeling of liberation from the internal struggle she had experienced. Lydia felt that once the decision had been made and she had become Catholic, she could now move onto the next stage of embedding her new faith into her life; Lydia's outlook had transitioned from one of confusion, worry and uncertainty to positivity and hope for the future.

The commitment stage of both accounts above highlights the importance of relational attachments in the final stages of the spiritual journey, in being able to see familiarity and likeness in those within the Catholic community and in the provision of emotional and spiritual support. Secondly, the accounts above emphasise the importance of ritual in providing a sacramental structure within which the spiritual journey can be framed, elevating the drama and significance of the final decision-making process.

### **7.5 Conclusion – Becoming Catholic: exploring the complexities of developing religious identity.**

This chapter has explored the formal process of adult initiation, focusing on stages Four and Five of Rambo's model, specifically the moments of Interaction and Encounter.

The findings revealed the visibility of the Affectional motif and the dominant influence of relationships, inter-personal bonds and social networks which shaped, guided and sustained (in many cases) the conversion experience. In the fourth stage of Encounter,

the role of the parish priest was found to be crucial in helping people to feel heard, supported and nurtured in their spiritual search; the clergy interviewed as part of the research adopted an active, missionary style which radiated a sense of openness, receptivity and adaptability. Since the findings revealed a concerning haphazard process of discovery for the local Catholic church by people with little religious knowledge or upbringing, and a shared recognition that they had been 'lucky' to find their local Catholic community, the role of the parish priest in meeting and welcoming people becomes even more significant. However, first contact was almost always accompanied by positive emotions and feelings of elation and excitement which carried people toward the next phase of formal catechesis.

Establishing and building a Catholic identity began in earnest in the stages of formal catechesis and respondents were especially aware of the elements of Catholicism which most attracted them and which they saw as intrinsically linked with religious identity. These elements included the richness and heritage of Catholic tradition, the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist and devotional practises such as the Rosary.

Rambo's fifth stage of Interaction saw a small group of respondents engage in one-to-one catechesis with the parish priest, whilst the majority of those interviewed were prepared for initiation through the RCIA. For catechumens with little religious upbringing, the rite was found to be especially strong at transmitting the intricacies of Catholic belief, practices and cultural norms through ritual, roles and rhetoric which helped to convey the magnitude and drama of Catholic initiation. For Candidates, particularly those from the Anglican tradition, the rite was found to be rather pedestrian, covering already familiar Christian ground and was perceived as a one-size-fits-all option which was not well suited to a spectrum of Christian backgrounds.



The Affectional and Experimental conversion motifs were especially visible in the stages of Interaction and Encounter and the RCIA played an important role in providing a supportive framework and set of strong and inspirational role models, which people could observe and 'try out' in the process of religious change. The sense of belonging and acceptance attained through community and new social networks was especially powerful in helping people to make their final commitment to become Catholic. Being able to see likeness and familiarity in both the people around them and in the style and character of religious practice, was instrumental for those in the final stages of decision-making and captured through feelings of surrender, relief and liberation.

## 8 CHAPTER EIGHT: Life as a new Catholic - One Year On.

### 8.1 Stage 7: Consequences

Personal bias in assessment
<i>Nature of consequences</i>
<i>Affective</i>
<i>Intellectual</i>
<i>Ethical</i>
<i>Religious</i>
Social/Political
<i>Socio-cultural and historical consequences of conversion</i>
Religious landscapes
<b>The Magnitude of Ritual</b>
<b>Intellectual and Affectiveal moitfs</b>
<i>Unintended socio-cultural consequences</i>
Nationalism
Preservation of the vernacular
Secularisation
Psychological consequences
Progression
Regression
Stasis
<i>Stories of conversion</i>
Theological consequences
<b>Key:</b>
<i>Areas of resonance – italicised</i>
<b>Areas of divergence – bold.</b>

Figure 19: Stage Seven 'Consequences'

#### 8.1.1 Introduction

As observed in Chapter Seven, great care is taken by clergy and catechists to guide people through the process of adult initiation, to enable them to adjust to a new life as a Catholic. Findings from the interviews revealed however a less uniform assimilation into the life and practice of Catholicism, with respondents often reporting feelings of overwhelm and anxiety well into the first year as a new Catholic. The following

quotation captures the spiritual and emotional roller coaster which many respondents experienced,

‘I’ve made some pretty big steps, but why, why am I the only one doing it? Why is it me and five pensioners that are in church, you know? There should be more’  
(White, male, 36-50yrs)

Once received into the Church, immediate propulsion into Catholic life left people feeling alone and disconnected in their post-baptismal journey. The opportunity to conduct four follow up interviews provided an insightful window through which to observe the experiences and various ways in which new Catholics adjusted to and coped with life after their reception into the church.

### **8.1.2 Longitudinal reflection: follow-up interviews**

Four interviews were conducted with first wave respondents, all of whom identified either as ‘Nones’ or classified themselves as having nominal religious backgrounds. Tristan and Mark were leaving the Church of England to become Catholic, whilst Helen and Lydia had not been baptised. All four respondents identified as White British; in terms of age, Tristan, Mark and Lydia were aged between 51-65 years, whilst Helen was aged 18-25 years. Interviews were conducted approximately twelve to eighteen months after being received into the Catholic church; respondents were asked to consider their time since becoming Catholic, specifically thinking about their perceived expectations of life as a new Catholic compared with the lived reality. There was a profound sense of catharsis present in their reflections which seemed to suggest that they found some satisfaction in the opportunity to bookend various issues which had been dominant for them during their spiritual journey.

### **8.1.3 Affectional: The Magnitude of Ritual**

In first wave interviews, frequent mention was made about the symbolic intensity of the final stages of RCIA and particularly the Rites of Welcome and Election which took place at St George's Cathedral, in the Archdiocese of Southwark. What became clear was a distinctive shift in outlook between the way in which born Catholics perceive such events compared to those preparing to be received into the church.

For born Catholics, the swelling numbers of Candidates and Catechumens, family and friends who attend the Cathedral to support their loved ones in the culmination of their spiritual journey, is seen as a source of pride and joy. The beauty and symbolism embedded within the rites and the liturgy become a wondrous celebration of the richness of Catholic tradition and its enduring attraction within secular society. Whilst all those who were able to give a follow up perspective were unequivocally positive about their decision to become Catholic, many also described feeling scared, overwhelmed or anxious at certain stages of the process of religious transformation.

Both Helen and Lydia reported feeling increasingly anxious about the upcoming services at the Cathedral; for Lydia, this caused some uncertainty as to her own readiness to become Catholic at this point and for Helen, her anxiety at the number of people at the Cathedral caused her to feel overwhelmed at the magnitude of her spiritual journey and these feelings transferred to her family members who attended on the day. She explained,

there were so many people, priests, bishops and then your name coming up on the screen, that was very overwhelming, you know? Writing your name in the book, I felt a bit of pressure negatively, to get everything right, you know, going from a church to a cathedral was a massive step...I brought some family and friends with me and I think they found the whole cathedral really overwhelming, that was really scary and more scary than my baptism actually. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

The literature has much to say about the importance of ritual in marking religious change, and in conveying a sense of journey within spiritual progression and this is particularly reflected in the structure of the RCIA (Shaughnessy 1985:58; Rambo 1993:129, Grimes 2002:3; Yamane, 2014:91). However, these findings reveal, that the significance of ritual can have negative as well as positive effects. The support provided by catechists and other members of the team is of profound importance and provides sound rationale as to why the RCIA celebrates rites and ritual within the heart of the worshipping community, a supportive framework and solid social network.

Feelings of pressure regarding the desire to ‘fit in’ to the existing parish community were often expressed in first wave interviews and reinforced in the follow ups to such a degree that it was possible to extrapolate this for many of the research participants.

Frida’s desire to become part of the community within the Union of Catholic Mother’s group characterised her faith journey from the very beginning and Max, who received such positive support from his RCIA group that he referred to himself as Catholic before even being received into the church. In first wave and follow up interviews both Helen and Lydia said that they felt overwhelmed and at times, scared at the daunting prospect of knowing how to behave in a Catholic church. Helen explained,

Like at Mass, I still don’t always know what to say and when to say it but I feel like I should know it now I’m Catholic but I feel it’s really hard to take it all in and remember it for the next Mass. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

Lydia echoed feelings of what new Catholics ‘should’ know and frequently referred to herself as a ‘bad Catholic’ because she had not received the sacrament of Confession as often as she felt was expected. At the beginning of his follow up interviews, when asked to reflect on the past year, Mark began by expressing areas which had clearly bothered him,

It's been difficult to get to Mass but I always knew it would be... We had just finished with the RCIA, Easter day I was accepted. After that I got busy with other things, it threw me off kilter. So I didn't make it to Confession, maybe only been about 3 times since. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

What was evident from the follow up interviews, was the immense pressure that many of the research participants experienced both during their journey to become Catholic and afterwards. It is important to assert that feelings of pressure and anxiety occurred even where it was clear that RCIA group leaders, priests and catechists had tried to allay their concerns and fears. In a way, it is testimony to those who come forward to become Catholic, that they demonstrate such reverence for Catholicism, despite the fact that the magnitude of the journey often overwhelms. This finding very much supports the literature that those who actively pursue faith, regard it as something highly valuable and precious (Yamane 2014:7; Richardson 1985:168). As such, the findings from this research revealed the potential requirement for additional consideration and support for those seeking to become Catholic in handling and adjusting to this newly acquired treasure of Catholic faith and identity.

#### **8.1.4 Religious: Catholic faith identity formation**

The follow up interviews provided key insights into the intricacies and building blocks involved in establishing a new Catholic identity. As was reported in the Literature Review (Chapter 3), the church recognises that new Catholics require a solid support network to enmesh their new religious identities with the worshipping communities but also realise that in practice, the experience of mystagogy can be varied, sparse and in some cases non-existent (Schellman 2010:1; Casey 2021; Shaughnessy 1985:72; Yamane 2014:165). The follow up interviews provided an invaluable window into the practical experience of integrating as new members into an established Catholic community and culture.

Lydia began her reflective account by immediately reviewing her anxieties over becoming Catholic, which in her first wave interviews, had caused her to feel uncertainty whilst attending RCIA. Many of Lydia's worries centred around whether she was becoming Catholic for the right reasons, in addition to feeling worried about her ability to learn the intricacies of church teaching and Catholic doctrine. Whilst uncertainty over her choice to become Catholic had resolved in the final stage of commitment, just before the Easter Vigil, Lydia had used the following year to allay her anxieties over what was expected of her as a new Catholic. Lydia explained how her rationale had changed over time,

Since we last met, the one thing that I've kind of realised is that I can make this faith what I want it to be rather than having to be what I perceived from other people...the other conclusion I've come to is that the pressure that I initially put myself under, that I needed to know everything in order to be a properly functioning Catholic, it's not there now (laughing) and I think, 'well I've got years to do that'. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

In the process of cementing her own faith identity, Lydia had effectively worked through what being Catholic actually looked like and this challenged her own perceptions of what being a 'good Catholic' actually meant. By witnessing a spectrum of different Catholic personalities, practices and attitudes, Lydia said that she realised that there were very many different ways of being 'devout'.

There had been several requests for Lydia to become involved in the new RCIA programme and to volunteer at church in various ways; whilst Lydia was already involved in the choir, she had been asked to read at Mass and she admitted that she still found the prospect of getting more involved in the community slightly overwhelming, referring to it as 'a big step'. Whilst much has been made in the literature of the importance of inter-personal bonds and their role in helping people feel part of the new religious community, these findings reveal that this process is not always easy and

comes with its own distinct accommodations. Since becoming Catholic however, there was a palpable sense of release from the pressure that she had experienced during her spiritual journey. When considering the future, Lydia frequently mentioned that she would now do things in her own time and felt she achieved more ‘balance’ in the relationship between her new faith and her family, who were largely anti-religious.

### **8.1.5 Intellectual**

Tristan’s conversion narrative highlighted a strong association with the Intellectual motif from the outset (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981:376). At the beginning of the follow-up interview, Tristan enthusiastically recounted a flourishing of reading materials and resources which had deepened his faith since becoming Catholic. In the year since becoming Catholic, it was clear that Tristan was engaged in a process of integrating his new faith identity and consolidating his knowledge base. He explained,

[my reading has been] big on theology of the body - slowly plodding through the commentary of Pope John Paul II, *Humanae Vitae*, I sort of wish I had come across these things 30 years ago and I suppose what I'm coming across are so many gems within the church. The Catholic church is so good at preserving its history through its devotion to the saints and there's so much material there, I feel like a kid in a sweet shop really, I just want to read and read. I took the name Thomas as my Confirmation name, after Thomas Aquinas, because I am scientist by training so reason is really strong for me, and faith and he brings those together absolutely key for me. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

Tristan recounted a plethora of Catholic internet resources which he had found helpful; he referenced Bishop Robert Barron (2018), Matt Fradd (2018), Ascension Presents (Schmitz, 2021) and many others. What was particularly interesting was that Tristan had been particularly keen to share resources with his family, friends and those from his previous church community. He explained,

Most people have been interested, haven't found it threatening and, the collection of churches we were a part of...most people there have been warm, open and welcome, a bit confused over what they weren't accessing that has now been made available to me, so I think I'm an interesting case. (White, male, 51-65yrs)



Within the Christian understanding, Tristan's account concludes with the final phase of the conversion cycle, the point at which people seek to share their newly found faith and undergo the type of radical change which characterises true conversion (Travisano, 1970:598). This stage is represented in the seventh stage of Lofland and Stark's 'value added' model (1965) and reflected in research by the Pew Forum which found that people who have switched between religions have a fervent zeal for proselytising (Liu, 2009).

When asked to reflect on the past year, Mark echoed Tristan's experience of widening his reading materials and internet resources. The emphasis on the re-intellectualisation of the spiritual quest was highlighted by Gallagher in her work with Polish Catholics; she suggests that those most open and flexible were more likely to nourish their faith within an intellectualised and privatised contemporary context (Gallagher 2016).

Mark's conversion account was characterised by the Intellectual motif in the early stages of Crisis and Quest and these had emerged as recurring themes over the last year. (He had been particularly interested in watching conversion testimonies on the internet; in particular he referenced YouTube videos from Christian apologists such as Ravi Zacharius (2017), and psychologist Jordan Peterson (2016). Mark frequently quoted Pope Francis as someone who continued to inspire him on his journey, explaining,

especially [Pope] Francis - he's such a lovely man. His compassion, his eagerness to try and undo some of the damage that secularism has perpetrated and has fuelled the fire of secularisation. ... Listening to him, he really is a healing spirit. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

In his first interview, Mark admitted that it was the 'spooky stuff' in Catholicism that particularly attracted him and when reflecting on the past year, he said that he had been praying for God to open his eyes to opportunities to help people and seemed open to mystical experiences which he was keen to share, referring to their sudden occurrence

and content as 'weird'. He described an event which he felt was profound and his account is included below in full,

At work, I was trying to find an address and I couldn't find it and there was a man on the corner, and I asked and he said, 'there's a church there, maybe you should ask in there'. I said 'No, it's closed'. Another fellow walked past and said, 'I know where that is, I'll show you and then proceeded to walk in the opposite direction to the one he said he was going'. Anyway, I got back to my car and there was a blind man with a stick and I could tell immediately that he was lost, I waited but then thought, 'hang on a minute, he's clearly lost, you should stop and help'.

So I kind of half-heatedly stopped the car, got out and said 'are you lost?' He told me where he wanted to go and I tried to point him in the right direction. As we were walking down the road, I asked him 'have you been like this a long time?' and he said, 'what lost?' and, laughing, I said 'no, blind' and he said 'yes, how about you?'. And then I turned around to see where he had gone and he had disappeared. It was three times that I asked for help, the last man went out of his way, I realised that it had taken me ...three reluctant attempts to help the blind man and he ended up helping me. That reluctance - it's like the drag to faith. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

Mark felt that since being received into the church, he had been presented with opportunities by God to open his eyes to the world around him, which had been previously hidden from view. The accounts above clearly demonstrate the blossoming of religious identity and character in people, in the year directly after becoming Catholic. In follow-up, respondents felt they had time and space to engage in a process of spiritual consolidation and exploration. This finding in particular resonates deeply with Fowler's observations of the transition stage of Conjunctive faith, in which people display a receptivity and openness toward religiosity, myth and symbol and are predisposed to making their final commitment to faith (1984:65).

In many ways, the longitudinal reflections directly echoed many of Rambo's insights relating to the sixth stage of Commitment (1993:124-141). Rambo asserts that religious transformation involves the fundamental changing of an individual's spiritual, emotional, metaphysical blueprint in the act of realigning with a particular religious

belief system. Rambo suggests that this process naturally occurs when people begin to interact experientially with the religious group; the accounts above however perfectly captured this process of realignment and the meshing together of newly acquired faith identity and the practical aspects of Catholic practice and culture. The blending of emotional, spiritual, and psychological insights in the accounts above however, were more pronounced in the time *after* becoming Catholic, in the seventh and final stage of consequences. This finding demonstrates how the period after initiation is richly adaptive and malleable for people and as such, plays a crucial role in the period of Mystagogy in shaping and embedding new religious identity (Schellman 1985; RCIA, 306).

#### **8.1.6 Affectional : Reactions of family and friends**

In follow up, it emerged that Lydia's husband had become more comfortable and accepting of her religious journey to become Catholic. In turn, this acceptance seemed to ease her own anxiety and foster self-confidence in her new religious identity. Whilst Lydia and her husband were on holiday in Rome, he asked if she would like to attend Mass whilst they were away. For Lydia, this represented a fundamental turning point in her husband's acceptance of her new faith identity and seemed to symbolise a way to move forward as a Catholic in their family. With a distinctive sense of self-awareness and pragmatism, Lydia described the new religious pathway that she had carved out for herself,

To be honest we don't talk about it, you know? I just say to [my husband], 'I'm going to church'. He doesn't ask me what I'm going to do and I don't tell him, I suppose in a way I don't want there to be any awkwardness - he is so bristly about religion and our children are as well. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

Lydia recounted the experiences that had led to her husband's negative associations with Catholicism and those of her mother who had concealed her own Catholicism for

her entire life. Her husband had been raised Catholic in Glasgow and suffered in the hands of a Catholic education, when it was discovered that he was left-handed. Lydia's mother had been raised in a Sister Of Mercy convent in Ireland and as a result, suffered abuse and ill treatment. As Lydia concluded, her mother had never walked away from her faith but instead privatised her belief to the degree that it was never revealed or shared. In terms of her own marriage, Lydia said that she carried a sense of hope for the future, that her husband would become more receptive and comfortable to be able to discuss religion openly, that her faith would move into the light and away from being the 'elephant in the room'.

Tristan's first interview involved discussion around the emotional and personal costs associated with his own journey to become Catholic, and primarily around the wider implications for his wife. At the beginning of the follow-up interview, Tristan recounted his own reception into the church and closely followed with the statement that his wife had not yet 'transitioned across'; from this comment, it was clear that Tristan wanted his wife to explore the prospect of becoming Catholic and that he was very aware of their worshipping in separate places. From the following comment, it was clear that Tristan felt a sense of loving commitment for the spiritual wellbeing of his wife and bore a responsibility to ensure that he was wholly supportive whilst also respecting his own religious obligations and practices,

She hasn't yet decided to go the route I've gone, so its left her a little bit churchless really and I've said I'll support her and go back to [our previous church] but obviously be going to Mass as well...I would support her because I would feel a sense of responsibility for her sense of spiritual well-being. She's between the two because she can see some of the things that have pulled me across, that means that she doesn't feel too comfortable with the church that we were at. (White, male, 51-yrs)

The cost associated with Tristan becoming Catholic for both himself and his wife was evident throughout the interview. In the year following Tristan's reception into the

church, they had both worked hard to attend a number of religious courses and programmes, which incorporated both ecumenical and charismatic approaches, which he summarised 'feeds us both'. Tristan said that most of his friends had been open and receptive to his new Catholic identity and he felt free to share resources with them, which he felt they appreciated. Only one friend could not accept his conversion and this clearly caused Tristan a great deal of anguish. He admitted that his friend was still struggling with the move he had made but said that they were working through their differences and had not 'broken fellowship'.

Helen's experience regarding the reactions of her family and friends was overwhelmingly positive and seemed to have boosted her own confidence regarding her new Catholicity. Helen reflected on the fact that before becoming Catholic, she had concealed her religious journey from her friends; she explained the change in her attitudes since being received into the church,

Well I'm arranging [son's] christening now, my eldest son is a baptised Catholic and so all of my friends were invited to celebrate that with us. Before I almost, I hate to say it, but I almost used to feel embarrassed to say I was going to church but now it's just a part of my life, they've accepted it and so don't really even question it. They don't even bat an eyelid'. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

In terms of her close family, Helen felt that her pathway to becoming Catholic had led to a series of positive changes in her own family dynamic. Although he did not attend her baptism, Helen's father who had been raised Anglican but had never engaged in faith, had begun to stay with her at Christmas. He had expressed pleasure that they had a 'tradition' which they followed as a family and had begun to explore the Catholic faith by downloading a Catholic app on his phone. Additionally, Helen had found a new connection with her brother who lived in Australia with his wife; they had chosen to raise their children as Catholics. She explained,

I think he might start going to Mass with his wife. So it's all really fallen into place really, I think if he hadn't met his wife, he might have given me a bit of stick about this to be honest, but where he's now got his own journey, we both kind of get it. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

### **8.1.7 RCIA: relationships and social networks**

All those who participated in follow up interviews had attended RCIA groups as part of their adult initiation catechesis and when asked to reflect back on their experiences in the group, the results were overwhelmingly positive. People spoke with warmth and affection about the group leaders and the relationships that had been formed during the programme. Helen was most effusive about the sense of belonging and community that she gained, as well as the opportunity to debate and discuss contentious issues about Catholic teaching. She explained the benefits of group discussion, as part of the RCIA,

The debates clarified things and answered some of my questions, things I was unsure of and because there was such a large age range in the RCIA, I found that really useful because someone who has been in the church since birth, they agreed with me and so that made me feel better. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

Tristan echoed Helen's endorsement of the opportunities to discuss and explore various topics regarding Catholic teaching, practice or belief. In this regard, it became important to draw from the experiences of those who had been raised Catholic, since this seemed to help people absorb and explore Catholic culture in greater depth. Tristan explained that he had formed strong bonds with the RCIA leaders, one of whom had become his sponsor and they continued to meet during the year following Tristan's reception,

my sponsor, we still meet occasionally, often we would meet for lunch here in the city and he was very good at offering that, and I would just chuck him a load of questions and he would either get back to me straight away or point me somewhere, so that was a good dimension. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

### 8.1.8 Post Initiation Support

Of those interviewed in follow-up, all recounted various ways in which they had been contacted afterwards by their RCIA coordinators, priests or catechists. These ranged from receiving emails periodically to ‘check-in’ on their progress, meeting members of the RCIA group for lunch or coffee, frequent invitations to become catechists, readers, volunteers and of course, to re-attend the following year’s RCIA group as new Catholics.

Significantly, Lydia attended the new RCIA group but said that she felt increasingly uncomfortable as the weeks went on; initially this was because she was unable to attend each week and when returning, she felt her presence was upsetting the equilibrium of new relationships being formed in the group. She explained,

This year I went to the introductory meeting and the group was even bigger, and so I went but, I don’t know, I didn’t feel comfortable going because I felt like it was their time to be part of that process.. even though [RCIA coordinator] keeps asking me to come and says my input is really appreciated...I don’t feel qualified enough to comment really on their experience, I mean I don’t really know enough about the faith to be part of conversations. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

Lydia said that she still felt there were many issues that she would like to discuss in greater depth, especially since she felt that RCIA was a fast and intense process. Lydia expressed feelings of insecurity about attending an RCIA group in a leadership capacity, and discomfort at not ‘fitting’ into the group dynamic. Helen said that she too had been invited back to attend the RCIA group for the coming year, but felt that she needed a different focus; for Helen, refreshing the knowledge that she had absorbed in the course of RCIA was important, as well as being able to discuss certain practical elements relating to Catholic culture. She suggested the following solution,

I do feel you need a refresher; I feel like there could be a separate group for people who have done RCIA. I mean there were a few classes afterwards but only for about a month, so I feel even if it was just once a month, termly let’s say, just

to get together with those people, to see how they're getting on with their journey now, if they need anything...so just a refresher course [called for example] 'Now you're Catholic - What to do now?' (White, female, 18-25yrs)

From the follow up interviews, a common theme highlighted that usual RCIA group, simply did not address all the needs that had arisen for new Catholics (Schellman, 1985:1); arguably, the process of embedding knowledge, teaching and practice has a very different remit from the task of introductory Catholic catechesis covered in RCIA.

### **8.1.9 Group sessions vs. one-to-one catechesis**

Whilst Helen was overwhelmingly satisfied with the group approach adopted by RCIA, Tristan and Lydia both intimated that they might have liked to experience a one-to-one style of catechesis. Tristan recognised that RCIA was pitched for those with little knowledge of the Catholic faith and found the pace of the programme somewhat 'pedestrian'. For Tristan, who embodied the intellectual motif and had cultivated a broad and well-informed knowledge base for both Anglican and Catholic theologies, he said he would have liked to have had an opportunity for one-to-one discussions. He explained,

for me I just thought, 'I really want to know this particular doctrine - why the Immaculate conception? [for example]' It didn't really scratch that particular itch and that's where podcasts and the internet were really helpful and so if I'm being really honest, the distinctively Catholic bits of doctrine I dug up for myself, whereas in RCIA I was learning about general Christian principles that I probably knew most of anyway. (White, male 51-65yrs)

For Tristan, the RCIA appeared to play a supplementary role in his (largely) self-initiated intellectual quest. He was pragmatic about the scope of RCIA, recognising that it is difficult and complex task to run an adult initiation programme which caters for the needs of all.



Lydia expounded the enjoyment and support she found when she first began to explore the possibility of becoming Catholic, in the RCIA group. Since religion was not a topic which was openly discussed at home with her family, the RCIA provided a space within which Lydia could nurture and explore her newly awakened desire for faith. In follow up however, and after some reflection, Lydia said that she found the experience of attending RCIA overwhelming in terms of the breadth of topics to cover. She explained,

The RCIA was so intense, you know a new topic every week and you're just really skimming the surface, you know there was some really big questions and I suppose I would have liked a little bit of time one on one with a priest to unpick those questions because that would help with how you understand something, how you feel about it and how you respond. (White, female 51-65yrs)

Lydia had experienced an unfortunate exchange with an RCIA catechist who had made a judgmental statement over what 'good' Catholics should know at certain stages in their catechetical preparation and this had impacted her deeply. In many ways, Lydia felt that a one-to-one approach seemed preferential as a way of avoiding potential judgement from group members and thus providing a safer space within which to speak openly. Of course, the ideal is that RCIA groups would cultivate an open environment as standard, free from judgement, however, this is a particularly good example of where expectations and reality diverge.

#### **8.1.10 Resources**

Conversations within the follow up interviews quite naturally flowed into a reflective evaluation of the process of spiritual transformation and often prompted suggestions or recommendations for the future which were grounded in concrete experience and reality.

All the follow up respondents had gone through a process of sourcing resources which they found helped them during their journey to become Catholic. Of the core resources referred to most frequently was the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC, 2016) and the Youth Catechism, referred to as the *YouCat* (CTS 2011). People found the *YouCat* to be easily digestible and clear, and continued to use in the year after becoming Catholic to clarify parts of Scripture when attending Mass.

Respondents in follow up (and those in first wave interviews) who mentioned internet resources that provided the most help, mentioned US Bishop Robert Barron and related resources from his Word on Fire Institute (Barron 2021). For these respondents, Bishop Barron's videos provided a core source of supplementary support to RCIA or one-to-one catechesis; people felt he provided explanations which were clear and comprehensive, despite often dealing with complicated church teachings. Lydia explained what made Bishop Barron's resources so helpful,

[Bishop]Robert Barron, the way he speaks is very easy to understand and is very interesting. Going to the RCIA, they were presenting about the Trinity, it's a very personal issue but with Bishop Barron, he has spent his life learning about this and so it's not personalising it, its objectively what it is. I'm just aware of how [it is possible to] personalise the interpretation. (White, female 51-65yrs)

In addition to videos accessible via the internet, Tristan mentioned that certain Catholic podcasts had been especially useful in helping him to understand the intricacies and nuances of Catholic culture.

### **8.1.11 Becoming active members of the church community**

The willingness of respondents to offer recommendations for future RCIA groups was indicative of their fervent desire to share and pass on the faith they had received (Liu, 2009). Plans to embrace key roles in the church community was a common theme amongst these respondents as they contemplated the future.

Tristan had amassed a wealth of information on evangelisation courses in and around Southwark and Mark had expressed new ideas of ways in which to evangelise in his local community. Incidentally, both men were ideal models for the Intellectual motif in practice and as such, demonstrated a sophisticated and fluent understanding of Catholic teaching, and together with an infectious enthusiasm would be perfect role models, teachers and evangelists in the community. Tristan's new Catholic community were keen to see him become involved in the life of the church and had invited him to assist with leading a new Alpha course for the parish community. For Tristan, the enthusiasm and strong sense of community, which is integral to the Alpha framework, introduced a sense of familiarity and helped to reinforce and strengthen his place in the community. Further afield, Tristan and his wife continued to attend church events with a strong ecumenical focus, such as Chertsey Community 'Cor et Lumen Christie' (Stayne 2021). Establishing a sense of belonging and shared faith identity clearly nourished Tristan's new life as a Catholic and fostered a strong sense of mission and evangelisation – effectively bringing his conversion journey full circle.

Helen, one of the youngest respondents who had become Catholic after the birth of her first child, highlighted the sense of belonging she felt within the parish community as the biggest change which had occurred over the previous year. She explained,

its weird, I get more of a sense of peace now when I come into church, I used to feel that I didn't know my place but now I feel I do...its all in my mind I know, its really strange. I don't know if its because I feel more holy. I feel like I belong now I've done the journey, before I used to feel that I didn't know everything I should, but now it feels as though everything has fallen into place, definitely since I've finished my journey. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

In a similar way to Tristan, Helen expressed a strong desire to become a catechist, working particularly with the youngest children to instil the teachings of the Catholic faith in a way which would engage and enthuse. Helen said she was driven to ensure

that her own children, who at this stage were both now baptised Catholics, did not lose their faith later in life. Mark was exploring becoming part of the choir at his parish, as well as exploring various programmes for evangelisation in his local area. Whilst Lydia had expressed a need to think carefully about how she would become more involved in the church, she also expressed a desire to visit other local churches in the area, to see how things were done, to experience Mass and to explore other local Catholic communities.

Expressing strong plans for pursuing an active Catholic life in the community, highlights the fact that new Catholics require ongoing support and guidance, potentially through extended periods of mentoring and distinctive forums for new Catholics which would allow people to share their experiences, receive and give peer support and encouragement.

#### **8.1.12 Recommendations for the future**

Since three of the follow up respondents were initially unfamiliar with the RCIA at the beginning of the journey, they were agreed that more work should be done to highlight and promote the pathway to becoming Catholic both in parishes and in the wider community. Helen explained,

The initial introductory session was just cheese and wine, it was quite relaxed but as I say, I wouldn't have known about speaking to Fr and the RCIA [at the beginning of my journey]. I was just looking at the notice outside, you know? Its a tiny piece of paper and it needs to be big and bold and say 'Are you thinking of becoming Catholic' in big, bold letters because I didn't even know what RCIA was. So that sort of social media type stuff. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

Tristan echoed Helen's sentiment that in general, people seeking to become Catholic through the RCIA could benefit from a greater degree of signposting. Not only did he feel this could be helpful in terms of resources but also regarding the timeframe and

structure of the course and this was sometimes raised by other respondents. Several of those respondents with little religious background, said that they felt overwhelmed at the prospect of attending the Cathedral for the Rites of Welcome and Election. They felt that knowing about these stages and all that was involved would have lessened their anxiety as the process unfolded. Helen suggested,

maybe do a preparation class on [RCIA], I knew I'd have to write my name in the book and things but actually to talk through every single step because when you're there and you see that turn out, it all just goes. Definitely a step by step tutorial I suppose, by someone who has been through it. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

Helen said that the parish priest's input into their RCIA course was invaluable.

Although not present at every session, Helen recalled a session when the priest recounted his own call to the priesthood and this had a profound impact on Helen, along with conveying a strong sense of 'holiness' which she found powerful. She recommended that this type of session could be incorporated into subsequent courses.

Lydia felt that she would like to see the RCIA process extended to lessen the intensity of the topics to cover and to allow more time for discussions and generally being able to absorb more Catholic culture. She considered what advice she would give to someone considering becoming Catholic and joining RCIA,

Go with an open mind, don't be afraid to ask questions and be prepared to forge your own way within the faith - its taken me about a year to figure it out. It is not a fast process, it is a life long journey for me now, I thought it would take me a year but at the end of that time, there's still so much I still don't know. (White, female, 51-65yrs)

### **8.1.13 Feeling comfortable as a new Catholic**

The longitudinal interviews seemed to provide a cathartic space for people to reflect on their spiritual journey in its entirety, highlighting challenges and assumptions and

proposing insightful conclusions about the process of feeling comfortable as new Catholics.

In the course of the research, interest in the Rosary amongst the cohort of respondents was significant. Although it was one of the core areas of Catholic practice which people seemed to look forward to the most when embarking on formal catechesis, it was also the area mentioned most frequently as being shrouded in mystery, even after technical explanation. In follow up, discussions focused on potential opportunities for experiential teaching, since people continued to feel confused and overwhelmed when attending Rosary groups in church. Lydia recalled her first impressions when attending the Rosary as a new Catholic,

I've been to the Rosary a couple of times but I hadn't a clue as to what's going on, and although they had a session on it in RCIA, it doesn't quite prepare you for the experience of sitting through it and really appreciating it. I think I've come in at the tail end...I know its very meditative but when you walk in midway through you think 'what's going on?!' (White, female, 51-65yrs)

Adoration (CCC, 2628) was also mentioned as a popular devotion which people said they would like to go to more frequently but felt nervous to attend alone. Although all respondents had a sponsor during their spiritual journey, many suggested that they would have greatly appreciated having a parishioner assigned to them, almost like a school 'buddy' who would be on hand to introduce, encourage and accompany them to Mass and devotional sessions at the church. Since new Catholics confessed to feeling self-conscious, lacking the confidence to attend Mass and group devotions alone, it was suggested that having an experienced Catholic automatically assigned to them as a post-baptismal mentor would help to embed the Catholic culture and practice. Helen explained the type of support she would appreciate even after a year had passed since becoming Catholic,

now I'm Catholic I feel as though I have been thrown in the deep end and I have to learn it all myself, so [I would appreciate] someone who could give me a prompt. Even one person you're attached to, who you could email to ask questions etc. One day you're not Catholic and then you are and you aren't very different...I do feel the pressure on that, definitely. (White, female, 18-25yrs)

Much has already been said about the challenges people faced at the point of interaction and formal encounter, in finding their local church and making contact. For those recounting the sequence of events which had brought them to formal catechesis, there was a decidedly providential feeling of people being in the right place at the right time. As Lydia reflected on the nature of her first encounter with the local parish priest, 'If I hadn't met Fr that morning, we wouldn't be here talking [now]'.

What becomes true therefore is that very often, those who would benefit most from having an invitation to pursue faith at their local Catholic church are not the ones who would attend Mass regularly to hear announcements, who would even know that they were sought after by the church to welcome them into the Catholic faith with open arms. Helen said that the only reason she had ended up in her local RCIA group was that she had a 'back door' into the process through working at the local Catholic school and having family who were Catholic.

In his follow up interview, Mark spoke about his hopes for a more outward facing mission strategy for the church, which he felt would capture more people like him at critical times in their lives,

So yes, maybe there could be a bit more advertising...I would have appreciated probably a coincidental knock on the door but not from a Jehovah's witness but a Catholic who would say, 'Look if you feel you're missing something in your life, come here, just come along and investigate whether you want to become Catholic - an open invitation. (White, male, 51-65yrs)

Although at the current time both culturally and socially, (and lockdown symbolises this perfectly), amid the decline in faith identity and affiliation, there is a definite sense that

the church has in many ways, hunkered down in order to weather the storm of secularisation. Whilst this may be a perfectly valid preservation strategy for those within its walls, for those outside, there is a very real danger of feeling excluded, shut out or worse still, unaware of its existence entirely. As the previous discussions demonstrated, there are many facets of Catholicism which continue to attract even amid the counter-cultural trends of secular society, the riches of the church remain but are often concealed from view or shrouded in mystery.

#### **8.1.14 Conclusion**

The inclusion of longitudinal reflections in this research provided an invaluable snapshot into the experience of converts after a year of being received into the Church, as echoed in the literature (Rambo 1989:169; Saldana 2003; Neale 2012). The findings from the longitudinal interviews revealed a less uniform process of assimilation into the life of the Catholic as a Neophyte. People often recounted feeling a sense of overwhelm at the magnitude and drama of initiation ritual celebration, in addition to the task of crafting and solidifying their newly established Catholic identity.

The period of Mystagogy was found to be a time of rich discovery of new resources, practices and patterns of religious observance which deepened people's sense of authentic faith. This was however found to be a largely self-initiated process, especially for those whose journey was characterised by the Intellectual motif. In terms of post-initiation support, many people agreed that the RCIA catechists and clergy worked hard to keep in touch with them and often invited them back to attend RCIA sessions with prospective new Catholics. For those who took up this offer, the RCIA sessions, although interesting and welcoming, did not seem to fully address their specific needs as new Catholics and this prompted a wealth of new Mystagogical recommendations, which will be discussed in depth in the final concluding chapter. Overwhelmingly, the



findings showed that the new Catholics interviewed for this study were engaged, active and passionate about proselytising and evangelisation and craved guidance and support to put their unique gifts and talents to good use in the life of the new community. The final chapter seeks to conclude this research, bringing together and highlighting emergent themes resonating with the existing conversion motifs as they have featured in the conversion accounts of the respondents, and with the addition of my new branch motif as it appears within the framework of Rambo's model. Utilising the longitudinal reflections, the discussion culminates in a presentation of new recommendations for Catholic adult initiation in a contemporary context and potential for contribution to the evangelising mission of the Church.

## 9 CHAPTER NINE: Conclusion

### 9.1 Introduction

This doctoral research sought to present a detailed and profiled evaluation of Catholic conversion from a contemporary British perspective. The challenges involved in conducting this research were clear from the outset: attempting to present a cogent study of the ‘conversion phenomenon’, which is contextually sensitive and accounts for the experiences of a fragile group of individuals who are both small in number and difficult to reach.

With the accepted fragility surrounding those who had come forward to become Catholic however, was a recognition that this was an important, if not crucial area of exploration within which to better understand contemporary British Catholicism. Discovering the reasons why people would want to become Catholic, in an increasingly secular culture which cultivates a near hostility to religious practice and identity, serves as a signal toward the deficiencies in secular culture which cause people to search for something more. Becoming comfortable, conversant, and fluent in the narratives of people who find faith, against the odds, has important implications for the evangelistic mission of the church and the transmission of faith.

The interest generated by this research over the last four years has been particularly encouraging. Clergy, Catholics, the religious and non-religious alike have been intrigued by the assertion that religious change had the potential to be patterned, classified by type, nature and characteristics as opposed to reflecting a chaotically divine and impenetrable process. I have been asked in earnest about the church’s approach toward adult initiation, specifically relating to the RCIA and its efficacy and

whilst this was not the original focus for the research, it has nonetheless revealed a deeper turbulence amongst clergy and catechists regarding the ‘best’ ways to initiate contemporary British adults into the Catholic faith. The most recent and arresting question however, which will serve as a useful platform for this concluding summary, was asked within the context of a larger discussion about secularisation in contemporary culture. Having revealed some of the findings of the research, I was asked whether they expressed feelings of hope for the future.

The original decision to focus my research on Catholic conversion in the midst of a secularising culture represented an intentional choice to concentrate on the more positive landscape and counter trends of religious change. In the course of the following chapter, I propose to reflect on whether hope is still a realistic position to hold both for the future of the individual seeking to become Catholic and the Church’s role in initiating them.

## **9.2 Research aims and objectives.**

The primary objectives for this research were two-fold: to explore Catholic conversion in the UK from a contemporary context in order to answer the question ‘Who joins the Catholic Church and Why?’ The research sought to map the profile of individuals choosing to convert to Catholicism between 2018/19 across a sample of parishes in the Archdiocese of Southwark and to explore the motivations, factors and experiences which underpinned their decision-making.

Through this research, I wanted to understand more fully why some people persisted in following a Catholic religious pathway when all the socio-cultural trends point in the opposite direction, towards declining faith and mass disaffiliation (Bruce & Voas, 2019:21; Bullivant 2015:13). I wanted to investigate whether it was possible to apply

Lofland and Skonovd's typology of conversion motifs to the contemporary experiences of Britons seeking to become Catholic, to evaluate the status and positioning within the six motifs and to identify any new, emergent findings.

I conducted semi-structured interviews, fieldwork and consultations with twenty-two people seeking to become Catholic in 2018/2019, five members of the clergy, five RCIA catechists and four follow-up interviews with first wave respondents, from thirteen parishes across the Archdiocese of Southwark. I discovered that the six conversion motifs and their major variations were sufficiently capacious to differentiate and classify the subjective experience of the individual; I was able to explore the visibility and weight of the motifs within the six stages of Rambo's model of religious change, remaining alert to the potential for new variations which were contextually sensitive.

### **9.3 Conversion motifs: Context, Crisis and Quest**

Rambo's model identified very clearly that the major influential factors undergirding people's desire to become Catholic were illuminated within the first three stages of Context, Crisis and Quest. These were also the most likely stages to see the emergence of the dominant conversion motifs revealed through the findings of this research: Affectional, Intellectual, Mystical and Experimental, respectively (1993:21-59).

Rambo begins his model with a thorough exploration of Context because he sees this as the cornerstone upon which all other conditions, factors, processes in the conversion journey layer themselves. Whilst the macro context of secularising trends can exert a powerful influence on the choices, behaviours and cognition of society at large, Rambo contends that at the level of the individual, micro-context has the potential to overcome or neutralise the broader cultural narrative.

This became a critical launch point for the interviews, to explore the earliest and formative experiences which could gesture towards the first glowing embers of spiritual awakening, significant enough to overpower the secularising forces at work. As people began to explain what had brought them to the church on the day of the interview, they began to tell their stories and very naturally started with their religious upbringing and childhood experiences. Exploration of micro-context was, in many ways, like locating the four corner pieces of the jigsaw.

#### **9.4 The Primacy of the Affectional motif**

By far the most important series of factors at work in the first two stages related to positive affective bonds. As Lofland and Skonovd rightly assert, inter-connection and positive relationships play a critical role and they characterise the motif in the following way, ‘personal attachments or strong liking for practising believers is central to the conversion process’ (1981:380). The emergence of the Affectional motif was seen first in the earliest stage of Context bordering Crisis, presenting however with a significant twist.

For most respondents, early exposure to Catholicism was introduced by a family member, friend or partner. For people in this group, the influence of a close partner played a pivotal role in their faith journey by introducing them to Catholic belief and practice via their own engagement in catechesis or adult formation. Even with a contextually loaded or coloured perception of Catholicism which may have existed in the past, learning about the Catholic faith through the eyes of a loved one had the effect of re-presenting the faith in a fresh, new way. Respondents observed and admired positive qualities, values and characteristics as being specifically attributable to Catholicism and these became a positive motivation to both gain and share such qualities for themselves.

It was significant to observe the Affectional motif in operation for so many respondents, although not surprising. The findings reinforced the literature around the power of relationships and inter-connecting bonds in leading people to connect positively and observe the beneficial aspects of a particular religious movement and in providing a concrete support system (Lofland, Sknonovd 1981:378-380; Bromley & Shupe 1979:170; Bruce 2014:15; Rambo 1993:30, 102; Stark 1997:80)

Many respondents mentioned the key role of the parish priest in the stages of Crisis and Quest in helping to fan the flames of early religious awakening and representing a key source of spiritual and emotional support. Not only was the priest central to unlocking the teachings and practises of Catholicism, the ‘mechanics of faith’ as identified by one respondent, but he was symbolic and representative of the welcoming arms of the new, parish community. This finding illuminated the power of new social networks to provide people with a strong sense of community, belonging and support and as such, represent a key factor undergirding the experience of the individual at the early stages of religious change. (Lofland & Starke 1965:862-875; Lofland & Skonovd 1981:373; Starke & Finke 2000:117, Bruce 2014:15; Crossley 2006:143; Everton 2018:94).

The Church has long been aware of the power of relationships and social networks in the exponential rise and spread of early Christianity and in the transmission of faith generally. This research has found that personal attachments and inter-connecting bonds remain a primary pathway for faith transmission with people at the early stages of religious awakening. Contemporary Catholics and clergy have a vital role to play in harnessing their power to both attract people to Catholicism and to transmit faith through the practical outpouring of their belief and radiant joy of faith. This has much to say about the Church’s role in educating and empowering the laity in what has now become a vital and essential mission to the life of the Church.

## **9.5 Discovering a gap in the motifs**

Whilst the impact of current relationships and positive affective bonds were found to lay key contextual foundations with the power to trigger spiritual awakening, I began to notice a number of conversion accounts which emphasised powerful affective content relating to relationships in the past. I became increasingly attentive to the lack of flexibility within the major variations of the Affectional motif outlined by Lofland and Skonovd, which was characterised through relationships in the present, eliciting a mild emotional response. Significantly, the conversion narratives of people in this research, were often powerfully linked with loved ones in the past whose religious belief and practise had left a profound spiritual impression.

Observed particularly amongst the ‘Nones’ and those with nominal religious upbringing, it was usual for respondents to begin with strong affirmations about their lack of religious exposure and formal affiliation. As the interviews progressed however, they would frequently move to reveal a surprisingly rich internal store of memories, connections and relationships about early religious experiences associated with loved ones years before. Recollections of religious practice in early childhood were cumulative in nature, comprising nostalgic reminiscence which was unexpectedly powerful once reactivated in later life. Grandparents or family members who had taken these respondents to Mass as children, or spoken to them about faith were pivotal in their faith journey as adults.

It became evident that whilst socially affective bonds were emerging as a key influencing factor for early religious awakening, they sparked affective content which now presented with a greater and more dramatic emotional spectrum and involved relationships which were far from proximate, existing only in memory. The latent potential of such memories in respondents’ own religious journeys could not be

overstated, serving as powerful spiritual anchors upon which new religious experience could be positioned and early religious identity, established.

### **9.6 New branch motif – Affective Synthesis**

It was becoming increasingly clear throughout the research that nostalgic reminiscence of religious experience was an important influencing factor in reactivating faith in later life and yet was seemingly unaccounted for within Lofland and Skonovd's existing motif framework. Through the findings of this research, I propose a new branch to augment the Affectional motif, to take account of powerfully emotive memories, recollections and experiences of religiosity which figure in the conversion narratives of individuals for whom faith transmission had suffered a generational fracture (Bruce 2014:15).

The new branch motif originating from the findings of this research is called 'Affective Synthesis' and is characterised as follows:

1. The act of synthesising ideas, memories of nominal Christian upbringing, feelings, experiences of a significant person in relation to faith.
2. The rise of positive or negative affective content such as love, sadness, confusion and anger and which can be intense and powerful.
3. The involvement of social influence of a person in the past, often comprising deceased family members.
4. The provision of a highly contextual typology for the subjective experience of religious change in highly secularised culture and the impact of social influence on inter-generational faith transmission.

The significance of this finding for the Church regarding adult initiation lies in the narrative experience of the individual, their journey to faith and their search for



meaning. Amongst the ‘Nones’ and those from nominal religious upbringing, there lies a spectrum of religiosity already embedded in their reminiscences and experiences from loved ones in the past. Such recollections are powerful and have the ability to awaken a new faith journey and serve as an important connector to loved ones who have sown the seed of faith years before through their own religious observance.

### **9.7 Crisis as a trigger for religious change**

Much has already been made of the pivotal role of inter-personal attachments, the Affectional motif and its new branch, Affective Synthesis, in laying the contextual groundwork for spiritual awakening. The direction of this discussion now turns to one of the central questions driving this research, why do contemporary Britons want to become Catholic? Rambo’s model helped to illuminate times of personal crisis and disorientation as being a locus for the key motivational factors undergirding religious change.

Evaluation of the key trigger points for the respondents who took part in the research revealed a definite slant towards events or occurrences which were negative rather than positive in nature. A greater number of respondents revealed that their religious journey had been triggered through events such as the illness or death of a loved one, feelings of deficiency or exclusion and in some cases, a sequence of distressing events which caused a sense of internal disorientation. This finding resonates with the literature around the rise of early Christian communities and the almost instinctual turn to religion in times of distress, peril and uncertainty (Lofland & Stark 1965:862-875; Stark 1997:80; Crossley 2006:143). At times of crisis or great personal uncertainty, the Christian values of love, charity, community solidarity, acceptance and belonging are often highlighted in the service of others and become profoundly impactful (Stark 1997:80; Everton, 2018:35).

For some respondents, the sense of crisis or internal disorientation was triggered through a crisis of meaning and of faith identity. One of the youngest male respondents revealed that he had suffered a growing sense of confusion regarding gender roles amongst his peers; in his journey to Catholicism he discovered guidance and clarity which made sense and helped him find meaning. Echoing this sentiment, a member of the clergy asserted that the blurring of traditional societal roles through the process of secularisation could unwittingly have provided a rich, unique space within contemporary culture which Catholicism might occupy. For these respondents, exploration into the teachings and practises of the Catholic faith, reintroduced a plausible religious framework which helped them to find meaning and a sense of purpose in their life (Day 2013:193; Weber 2002:117; Berger 1967:47; Geertz quoted in Day 2013; Fowler 1984:57).

Crisis, as understood through the loss of faith identity was most frequently mentioned by people who had been raised within other Christian denominations. This was a particularly strong theme for Anglicans and members of the Church of England; people in this group were motivated towards religious change in response to developments in the church regarding female ordination and civil partnerships, with which they felt their faith identity no longer aligned. Several Anglican respondents who took part in the research had become Catholic through the Ordinariate, as Catholics of the Anglican Patrimony. The Ordinariate effectively provided an available pathway to Catholicism which allowed for the retention of certain elements of traditional Anglican heritage and traditions. Ordinariate worship captured for people the full beauty, theatre and drama of Catholic liturgy, helping them to establish and nourish their new religious identity.

It was interesting to find only a small number of people citing positive life experiences as catalysts for their religious journey. One person said that he had experienced a desire

for the transcendent, a reflective, ‘this didn’t happen by chance’ moment and another respondent cited the birth of her first child and a new relationship as important events which preceded serious religious reflection. Three respondents reported a mystical experience as being integral to their religious transformation but not as an independent factor. For all those who cited positive or mystical experiences, these were discussed as part of a broader sequence of cumulative, interacting factors, often involving personal attachments and pivotal life events.

### **9.8 Religious seekers – persistence and resilience**

As an important counter to the prototypical passive conversion account of St Paul on the road to Damascus, the respondents in this research were equally split between those demonstrating an active role in pursuing their faith and those who were open and receptive to encountering faith. In the active response group, the majority of whom were ‘Nones’ and those raised with nominal religious upbringing, respondents undertook a dogged pursuit of their new faith which was perceived to be radical, precious and worthy of protection. The majority of those coming from other Christian denominations exhibited a response style which was open and receptive (Rambo 1993: 330; Richardson 1985:163-179). Receptive seekers tended to be slightly older than those in the active seeker group, with respondents aged between 36-50 years and 65years and over and these displayed a more pragmatic and evaluative approach toward their spiritual journey.

### **9.9 The cost of becoming Catholic**

Perhaps one of the most poignant findings in this exploration of religious change, was the associated cost of becoming Catholic to both the individual and those around them. For the ‘Nones’ and those from nominal Christian backgrounds, respondents displayed a perceptive awareness of the views of their peers regarding their decision to become

Catholic. Many people knew that they might be ridiculed, dismissed or simply misunderstood by their family and friends and often responded by concealing or downplaying their religious journey. Others recognised that in choosing a religious pathway, they had effectively disconnected themselves from friends who no longer shared similar values.

For those coming from other Christian denominations, the costs involved were of a different nature but no less impactful. As people in this group displayed a slightly older profile, their religious plans and decision-making necessarily impacted the lives of close family members and friends, and as such required careful consideration and accommodation. This meant that for the first time in their adult lives, people experienced the reality of worshipping at a different church from their partners and close family members, which understandably caused ripples of emotional turbulence which travelled out well beyond the scope of the individual.

The weighty cost of religious transformation underlined the significance of attachment theory at work; for these respondents, the new attachments which they had formed as part of the new community outweighed any negative costs and moreover, helped to foster commitment and alignment (Lofland and Stark 1965:862-875, Lofland & Skonovd 1981:373). These findings consolidated a wider understanding of the impact of religious change and a growing sense of responsibility on the part of the church for the spiritual welfare not only of those coming forward to be Catholic, but also those in their close family and social networks.

#### **9.10 Challenges and obstacles to becoming Catholic**

The stages of quest and encounter were fraught with obstacles and difficulties in terms of making formal connections with the local parish teams. This included contacting

their local parish priest or RCIA coordinator, finding and travelling to a suitable church and juggling substantial personal commitments to attend sessions. As such, this research has illustrated that contemporary Britons seeking a path to Catholicism display a strong sense of persistence, resilience and are highly determined (Lonergan 1997:592-94; see also Kim 2010:986). In many accounts, people saw the sequence of events which led them to connect with the local parish as lucky and fortunate. From an observer's perspective however, the providential nature of connections and meetings revealed the uncomfortable reality that some faith journeys had only flourished because of coincidental occurrences.

### **9.11 The Intellectual motif and spiritual quest**

The Intellectual motif was most visible during the stages of Quest and Encounter. Characteristically, religious interest ignites through private investigation, giving way to feelings of illumination and awe and in turn provides a fertile soil upon which intellectual endeavour can flourish and develop. Respondents displayed an active response style, characterised through a driven determination to find theological sources and materials through internet searches and social media networks.

The findings from this research regarding the Intellectual motif supports the understanding that religious change can take place with minimal social involvement and can lead a person to embedded belief before the point of formal encounter. Whilst Lofland and Skonovd identified the Intellectual motif as being uncommon at the time of their research, they predicted a resurgence in the future. I suggest that as the power of the internet continues to grow and develop, the occurrence of the intellectual motif will continue to grow, given the increasingly privatised space which religion now occupies in contemporary society (Gaitano 2016:167).

### **9.12 Profile and demographics: the importance of knowing the numbers.**

Yamane purports that it is vital that the Church have current data and statistics to hand, suggesting that such knowledge is essential in providing an accurate picture of both the needs of the individual and the Church in the context of contemporary culture.

In this research, the initial process of data collection revealed a deficit in the uniform collection and recording of basic demographic information by the Church in England and Wales. I discovered early on that the amount of adult initiation data officially collected and maintained by the Church, was limited to the annual numbers received into the church at Easter. Official diocesan records publish annual data relating to parish population, weekly Mass attendance, infant baptism, Holy Communion, adult initiation and funerals. Diocesan RCIA records collect slightly more information on the numbers coming forward to attend RCIA each year per parish, detailing whether they are in fact Candidates (baptised) or Catechumens (unbaptised); if more detailed demographic data is collected, this is locally held by the parish priest for the brief period of formal catechesis, however this source of information is patchy and inconsistent.

At a basic, preliminary level, the solution appears to be relatively simple; collect information on people wanting to become Catholic in every diocese in the UK, by asking individuals to complete a simple form administered at parish level, collected by each diocese and maintained centrally within a national database. The value of knowing the basic demographic profile for people wanting to join the Church enabled me to construct an initial picture of contemporary Catholic seekers, tailored specifically for Southwark Archdiocese and which could also be compared against the broader national data. The vast majority of respondents (68%) were women, an unsurprising result given the gender disparity which is already observed in the contemporary Catholic

population (59.1% female), and the two largest age groups represented were 26-35 years and 36-50 years. In terms of ethnicity, there was a broadly equal number of Black African and White respondents; all Black respondents came from parishes in South-East and South West London, areas with characteristically high population density.

### **9.13 Candidates vs Catechumens – identifying a diverse profile of needs**

In this research, over half (52%) of respondents identified as Candidates. This broadly aligns with recent statistical findings that the majority of converts to Christian denominations have already been raised in a different Christian tradition (Bullivant 2015:13). This finding alone had major implications regarding the process of encounter and interaction for people in this group.

Some of the Candidates interviewed said that they found the groundwork of adult initiation catechesis through the RCIA as repetitive and pedestrian, failing to account for an already established knowledge and awareness of Christianity.

For Catechumens, feedback regarding the RCIA was overwhelmingly positive; for the ‘Nones’ and those with nominal religious upbringing, the RCIA truly represented a ‘school of catechesis’ and served as a comprehensive grounding in Catholicism (RCIA, 1985). This research revealed that for people in this group, the branch motif of Affective Synthesis was especially important; in theory, the gradual, structured framework of the RCIA lends itself to a deeper exploration of characteristics relating to the Affective Synthesis motif. For people in this group who had experienced fewer opportunities to reflect on their past in the light of faith, the RCIA provides a safe and supportive space for people to revisit and reconnect with distant memories and relationships to Catholicism.

Overall, this research found that the RCIA can often be used as a one-size-fits-all approach to adult initiation, failing to account for the spectrum of Christian awareness which exists in contemporary British culture (Bullivant 2015:13; Bruce & Voas 2019:17; Rambo 1993:20-22).

Having identified that a range of catechetical pathways is key to providing a more tailored, sensitive approach to adult initiation, it becomes pressing for adult formation to broaden its approach beyond the purely theological, offering resources which support people's mental and emotional well-being as they journey through this profound spiritual transition.

#### **9.14 The role of the Experimental motif in establishing a Catholic identity**

Developing an accurate picture of the profile and religious background of people seeking adult initiation allows parish teams to effectively plan and deliver tailored catechetical programmes which do much more than simply impart Church teaching. Adult formation provides a snapshot of Catholic culture and community and as such, the stages of encounter and interaction represent key, formative stages which comprise the building blocks for faith identity. The emergence of the Experimental motif was most visible during these stages when respondents who had been drawn to Catholicism through curiosity could practically envisage how their new faith identity could be lived out.

Becoming part of the Catholic community was a fundamental element for many people in establishing a new Catholic identity. For those drawn to Catholicism through the community, seeking belonging played a key role in the process of religious transformation and as such, formal catechesis represented the means through which they could try on the Catholic identity for size (Day 2013:193; Fowler 1984:51-67; Lofland



& Skonovd 1981:373; Bruce 2015:16, Hornsby-Smith quoted in Harris 2013:75-77).

The RCIA was particularly strong within the Experimental motif, achieved through the gradual, staged approach of spiritual development, marked by rites and rituals celebrated within the heart of the parish community.

Church groups such as the Union of Catholic Mothers, parish pilgrimages or courses such as Alpha or 'Life in the Spirit' were identified as pathways through which people found belonging, support and nurture as well as being a rich source of community role models. For those whose spiritual journeys were characterised through the Experimental motif, religious participation precedes belief which takes place over a longer time span. As such, respondents in this group often experienced feelings of uncertainty and anxiety until the final stages of being received into the Church at Easter. For these people, it was their experiences of Catholic life and community which demonstrated their own acceptance and 'fit' within the community and which solidified their final commitment.

The range of different religious expressions were pivotal for people needing to see themselves represented in the life of the church; this view becomes even more essential when one considers the diverse ethnic range which exists in Southwark Archdiocese, as reflected in the literature by Hornsby-Smith and Lee (1979), Bowman (2019:312-3). Priests, RCIA catechists and parish leaders played an instrumental role in motivating and encouraging people during their religious journey, by practically modelling the core qualities and characteristics of a contemporary British Catholic.

### **9.15 Catholic Attraction: Holy Eucharist, Reconciliation & The Rosary**

This research found that the quintessential elements cited by people as those which had most attracted them to the faith, also became the basic building blocks of their own Catholic identity.

The Sacraments of Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation were cited most frequently by respondents as the key foundations of their blossoming Catholic identity. Attending Mass daily in preparation to receive the Eucharist was perceived by all respondents as central in preparation for their reception into the Catholic Church. People felt that Catholic Mass was distinctly recognisable through the beauty of the liturgy, through which people said they could feel and appreciate the rich heritage of Catholic tradition and which conveyed a sense of peace, tranquillity and serenity.

Devotion to the Rosary was mentioned in every interview conducted in the study and as such, became a revealing and insightful finding. Devotion to Our Lady was identified as being distinctly Catholic and often held significance as a spiritual anchor to childhood memories of parents and grandparents who had used the Rosary to pray. The priest and RCIA catechists were seen as key role models who would impart the structural mechanics of the faith (Rambo 1993:79; Lofland & Skonovd 1981:379).

Drawing on previously mentioned scholarship by Litvack and Heimann which illuminate the central role of Catholic devotional life, Hornsby-Smith and Lee call for further research on twentieth century Catholic devotion, which is contextualised within Catholic community history (1979:33).

‘There is a need for a first class scholar to do for twentieth-century Catholic devotion what Heimann has done for the nineteenth, a study which places that devotion in the solid context of Catholic community history.’ (1979:33)

The Church has long extolled the power of beauty of such ancient devotional practises to draw people to Christ, as expounded by the Pontifical Council for Culture's document, *The Via Pulchritudinis* and recognises that a diverse evangelistic strategy will ultimately harness the most effective elements of both the present and the past. (Pontifical Council for Culture, 2021).

### **9.16 Adult initiation research – defining the contemporary Christian and the Church**

Concurring with Yamane and Kavanagh, the findings from this research allowed me to gain insights not only into the individual experience of adult initiation, but also the vision and transmission of contemporary Catholicism offered through the case study of one British diocese (Kavanagh 1991:145; see also Yamane 2014:7). Having explored the identity and characteristics of people seeking to become Catholic, the discussion now moves to the role and response of the Church in attracting and supporting contemporary would-be Catholics.

Ultimately, this research calls for a vital, urgent and insightful review of the Church's potential to expand the channels of communication between herself and her people. In line with conciliar instructions to evangelise through inculturation, the Church must become a gateway through which it communicates with culture on its own terms.

*Evangelii Nuntiandi* sets out the expectation very clearly, 'what matters is to evangelize man's culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots)' (EN 20). As endorsed by Pope Francis, this revisioning of the Church's mission is a perfect opportunity to make the connection between evangelisation and social justice, building Catholic Social Teaching into the process of adult initiation and thus providing the tools with which the link between the Gospel and contemporary culture can be made (Ivereigh 2010:17,33).

At local level and within individual's daily lives, the Church has enormous potential to both foster and nurture collective religious identity, through key relationships and the establishment of role models harnessed through clergy leadership (Reinhart 2021).

In terms of what this means for the Church in practical terms, there are strong connections between personal attachments, relationships and the role of Crisis in triggering early religious awakening. For clergy, the pinnacle sacraments of baptism, weddings and funerals represent valuable opportunities to reach the uninitiated. The Sacraments become a powerfully emotional celebration in which loved ones are consecrated in the heart of the Catholic community. These are the experiences through which people recall deceased loved ones and can reactivate latent religious memories. It is a precious opportunity to make everyone present feel welcomed and valued in a radical way that has real potential to spark a small, fragile spiritual flame.

### **9.17 Developing an approach of radical welcome**

Embracing a spirit of radical welcome will require more than offering the standard (yet valuable) opportunities for tea and coffee after Mass, catering to the already established members of the community. Radical welcome requires a substantial mindset shift. In the spirit of the priest who underwent considerable costs to replace the imposing wooden doors in his church for glass to encourage people in, churches must ensure that their entrances are welcoming to those inside and outside the community.

This inevitably leads to a process of careful introspection on the part of the parish community. Although the role of the parish priest serves as a spiritual beacon for many people in the early stages of religious change, the Church recognises the deep, abiding role of the laity in her evangelising mission (LG 31). The mindset shift will also need to be radical in order to fully recognise the unique challenges of contemporary British

culture; as the Second Vatican Council reflects on the Apostolate of the laity, this task requires training, time and effort, "[T]he laity must be specially formed to engage in conversation with others, believers, or non-believers, in order to manifest Christ's message to all" (AA 31).

Parish renewal programmes such as Divine Renovation, which operates both nationally and internationally, suggests that the Church at local level is beginning this important process of introspection; in the midst of strong secularising trends and haemorrhaging numbers of disaffiliates, the findings of this research point to a valuable tranche of people waiting for the Church's welcome, waiting for relationship. This research suggests that programmes of parish renewal become standard operating practice for *all* parishes in England and Wales, embedded within a broad driving imperative for the Church going forward. For a full list of evangelisation strategies raised during interviews with research participants, please see Appendix F.

### **9.18 The responsibility of mystagogy**

The findings of this research have demonstrated that there is a far greater responsibility on the part of the Church to go beyond pure transmission of facts, but to try and engage on a deeper level in the Catholic pedagogy - showing people how to *be* Catholic.

The stark reality is that new Catholics take a substantial period of time to feel confident and comfortable with the experience of being Catholic, even a year to eighteen months after being received into the Church (Schellman 2010:1; Yamane 2014:165). This thesis contends that a formal structure be implemented for the Mystogaogical period, so that people feel supported and have a regular forum through which they are able to share experiences and lessons learned. Although many respondents were invited to attend subsequent RCIA groups, many felt that their needs were radically different after

reception into the church and desired a specific group to attend which was tailored for new Catholics.

In terms of strengthening the role of the laity in welcoming new members, it makes perfect sense to harness the expertise of cradle Catholics, to pass on and help embed the jewels of Catholic culture to those who are thirsty and craving this knowledge and wisdom. Pope Francis' recent establishment of the ministry of the Catechist echoes the recognition that the people on the front line are the first glimpse of Christianity that many will have encountered for many years, and as such represent the face of contemporary Catholicism (Lamb 2021).

### **9.19 Conclusion**

David Yamane asserts that the study of adult initiation has the potential to illuminate both the experience of the individual seeking to become Catholic and the vision of parochial Catholicism transmitted by the Church.

For the contemporary Briton seeking initiation into Catholicism, this study has been able to identify that religious awakening can be characterised and framed within the language of motif experiences or typologies of religious change. Signposting toward the dominant typologies captured within the Affectional, Intellectual, Experimental and Mystical motifs, this research made a new discovery relating to a rich, internal store of religious memories, nostalgic reminiscence and emotional bonds which possess a powerful, latent potential for reactivating religious experience later in life. Embracing the dominant motifs characterised by Lofland and Skonovd's and augmented by the branch motif, Affective Synthesis, this research has contributed a powerful framework around which the contemporary Church can dialogue with contemporary culture about the nature of adult initiation to Catholicism.

This research asserts that people seeking to become Catholic in Southwark Archdiocese are keenly aware that they travel counter culturally in their pursuit of faith and are willing to withstand substantial personal cost along the journey. They display persistence and resilience and assume a sense of dignified responsibility for their new faith identity, which is treasured and protected against all the odds. It is this characteristic persistence which engenders powerful feelings of hope; this research found that it is through the disorientation, uncertainty and grittiness of real life that people are drawn to Catholicism. These experiences are immutable, shared human conditions which transcend the strata of parish, deanery and diocese, representing a powerful channel through which the Church and therefore Christ can communicate.

The findings of this study have illuminated the central, inherent beauty of Catholicism which remains a magnetic source of attraction for people in a contemporary context. Core beliefs, teaching, values, and ancient Catholic devotions such as the Rosary and the sacraments of Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation comprise the bedrock of a distinctive identity which people recognise as being authentically Catholic and as such, desire for themselves. Indeed this findings resonates and echoes the importance of popular religiosity which is deeply embedded in English catholic culture, and is a key element in building a new Catholic identity (Harris 2013:3,5).

Looking ahead, I believe that conducting a detailed, tailored exploration of the needs of people in every diocese in the UK would equip the Church to reap a harvest with abundant potential (Mt 9:37). The hope for the Catholic Church therefore lies in Her potential to take stock, review and move forward with a plethora of evangelistic strategies which are sophisticated, intelligent and sensitive to the spectrum of religiosity characteristic of modern British culture. Overall, I am hopeful this study will contribute to the growing dialogue around contemporary conversion in a British context,

encouraging a multi-faceted approach to conversion research at a time when, as we embark on national easing of Coronavirus restrictions, the sociological landscape promises to be particularly fertile.



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## 11 APPENDIX A

### **'Who joins the Catholic Church and Why?': Exploring the nature of religious conversion for individuals in the Archdiocese of Southwark**

#### Survey

Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey, it should only take between 5-10 minutes to complete. The information you provide will help us to better understand the profile and background of people seeking to convert to the Catholic faith.

Name.....

Parish.....

What is your gender?

- Male  
 Female

What is your age?

- Under 16  
 17 – 25  
 26 – 35  
 36 – 50  
 51 – 65  
 Over 65

What is your marital status?

- Married  
 Widowed  
 Separated  
 Divorced  
 Living with Partner  
 Single  
 Prefer not to say

How many children are there in your family?

- 0  
 1 – 2  
 3 – 4  
 5 – 6  
 More than 6

How would you describe your ethnicity?

- White  
 Black (African origin)  
 Black (Caribbean origin)  
 Black (Other origin)  
 Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi origin)  
 Asian (Chinese origin)  
 Asian (Other origin)

How would you describe your current employment status?

- Unemployed  
 Employed (Part-time)  
 Employed (Full-time)  
 Looking for employment  
 Student  
 Retired  
 Other (please give details overleaf)

Lead researcher: Susan Longhurst

Email: [115848@live.stmarys.ac.uk](mailto:115848@live.stmarys.ac.uk)

Contact: 07773689535

Cont'd

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.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Please select the response below which best describes your religious upbringing, if any:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Catholic
<input type="checkbox"/>	(Other) Christian denomination *
<input type="checkbox"/>	Non-Christian denomination *
<input type="checkbox"/>	No Religion
<input type="checkbox"/>	(Other) *

\* Please specify .....

Have you received any of the following sacraments?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Baptism
<input type="checkbox"/>	Confirmation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Holy Communion

Please tell us briefly below the main reason you are attending RCIA or similar programme in your parish:

--

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this survey. A number of individuals will be invited to take part in an interview with Susan Longhurst, Lead Researcher for this project. Please indicate below if you would like to take part in an interview and let us know your preferred contact details:

<input type="checkbox"/>	YES, I would like to take part in the interview
<input type="checkbox"/>	NO, I do not wish to take part in the interview

Email	
Tel. no	

Lead researcher: Susan Longhurst

Email: [115848@live.stmarvs.ac.uk](mailto:115848@live.stmarvs.ac.uk)

Contact: 07773689535

## 12 APPENDIX B

### **‘Who joins the Catholic Church and Why?’: Exploring the nature of religious conversion for individuals in the Archdiocese of Southwark**

#### **12.1 Semi- structured interview outline – Research Participants**

- Can you tell me about your experience of religion prior to your conversion?
- When did you first know that you wanted to become Catholic?
- What would you say were the main reasons for wanting to convert to Catholicism?
- Can you tell me the story of your conversion?
  - Prompts (if needed):

Would you say that your conversion was sudden or gradual?

Did you experience an active or passive role in your conversion e.g like Saul on the road to Damascus, did you regard this spiritual transformation as something that happened to you or was it something you actively pursued? o Have there been key people, or events that have influenced you?

- How did you know that, in terms of spiritual transformation, what you had experienced was ‘authentic’, the real thing?
- Would you say you have experienced key life changes, positive or negative, following your conversion?
- Once you decided that you wanted to become Catholic, what were your next steps?

- Prompt: Did you know about the RCIA or other programme in your parish?
- What are your expectations about the process of initiation e.g RCIA or other programme?
- What are your observations/ experiences of attending RCIA sessions?
- How do you see the future after conversion?
- Is there anything else you would like to add before we conclude the interview?

**‘Who joins the Catholic Church and Why?’: Exploring the nature of religious  
conversion for individuals in the Archdiocese of Southwark**

**12.2 Semi- structured interview outline (Advocates: Clergy, Catechists)**

Can you define for me please what the term ‘conversion’ means for you?

How long have you been involved in the ministry of RCIA and what is your current role in this parish?

What are/have been your experiences of working in this ministry?

Can you describe the way in which the RCIA is delivered in this parish?

What elements would you say work well?

Are there areas you would like to see improved, developed or changed?

In your experience, what are some of the key motivations for people who choose to convert to Catholicism?

For those who have worked in RCIA ministry for several years:

For you, does the process of conversion display common factors, patterns, similarities which connect individual experiences?

In your experience over the last few years, have you noticed any changes in the:

Number & profile of individuals seeking conversion

The reasons given for their decision to become Catholic

What role does the parish community play in this process for both catechumens and neophytes?

In your opinion are there additional ways that new Catholics could receive support within the parish community?

Initiation catechesis is often referred to as a process of conversion, not a programme of classes – what are your thoughts on this in relation to your parish?

What are your hopes and aspirations for neophytes in the life of the Catholic church?

Is there anything else you would like to add before we conclude the interview?

### 13 APPENDIX C – THEMATIC SCHEMA

Chapter & Stages	Themes
<p>One</p> <p>1-3 Context, Crisis, Quest</p>	<p>Stage 1 – Context</p> <p>Religious Upbringing</p> <p>Role of parents, grandparents, influence at school</p> <p>Earliest memories, images, symbols</p> <p>Perceptions/Assumptions of Catholicism</p> <p>Attraction to Catholicism:</p> <p>Receiving the Eucharist at Mass</p> <p>Richness of Catholic spirituality</p> <p>Mystery of faith – embodied within the structure of Catholicism which helps people to <i>‘internalise, to ponder the greater mysteries’</i> (Respondent 1) and therefore to make sense of human mortality</p> <p>Patristics – heritage of Church authority and development of doctrine</p> <p>Beauty of Liturgy – Ordinarate experiences</p> <p>Stage 2 – Crisis</p> <p>Interpersonal bonds</p> <p>Influence of dying relative</p> <p>Role of clergy</p>

	<p>Influence of spouse/partner – positive and negative</p> <p>Personal search</p> <p>Feeling of urgency or timeliness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life change</li> </ul> <p>Considerations of mortality – funerals as a major catalyst</p> <p>Having children</p> <p>end/beginning of key relationship</p> <p>University groups</p> <p>Stage 3 – Quest</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need for belonging &amp; Identity</li> </ul> <p>Personal search</p> <p>Challenges to conversion</p> <p>Reconciling faith and reason</p> <p>Pursuing faith in secular society – influence of media, perception that faith is regarded as bad or wrong.</p> <p>Reaction of friends and family – both positive and negative reactions were acknowledged in the interviews but interestingly did</p>
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	<p>not seem to substantially affect the individual's journey once the decision to convert had been made.</p> <p>Doubt and Anxiety</p>
<p>Two</p> <p>4,5 - Encounter, Interaction</p>	<p>Stage 4 – Encounter</p> <p>Role of the clergy</p> <p>Issuing an invitation</p> <p>Contrast with other Christian denominations</p> <p>Reactions/ preconceptions regarding the convert's 'journey'</p> <p>Encountering welcome – 'Ordinariate' experience</p> <p>Stage 5 – Interaction</p> <p>Diversity of approach</p> <p>Support mechanisms</p> <p>RCIA</p> <p>Accessibility of groups, size of classes, not responding to the spectrum of religious backgrounds of people wanting to know more.</p> <p>Practical arrangements of attending RCIA classes e.g childcare, juggling work commitments etc.</p> <p>Catechetical gap – expectations, content, delivery</p>
<p>Three</p>	<p>Stage 6 – Commitment</p>

<p>6,7 – Commitment, Consequences</p>	<p>Belief participation sequence – commitment coming both before and after reception into the church</p> <p>Authenticity – when do people feel ‘good enough’ to be Catholic</p> <p>Stage 7 – Consequences</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Importance of Mystagogy</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Life changes</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Expectations after one year</p>
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14 APPENDIX D - Research Ethics Committee Approval (St Mary's University)



St Mary's  
University  
Twickenham  
London

5 July 2018

SMEC\_2017-18\_131

**Susan Longhurst (ETL): 'Who joins the Catholic Church and Why?': Exploring the nature of conversion for individuals in the Archdiocese of Southwark'**

Dear Susan

**University Ethics Sub-Committee**

Thank you for re-submitting your ethics application for consideration.

I can confirm that all required amendments have been made and that you therefore have ethical approval to undertake your research.

Yours sincerely

Prof Conor Gissane  
Chair, Ethics Sub-Committee

cc Dr Maria James

## 15 APPENDIX E 'RCIA packs the pews at St George's Cathedral'.

From the moment the young man in his twenties entered the room, he conveyed a sense of openness and a keen desire to share the story of his journey to become Catholic. Although not baptised as a child, he recalled attending Mass with his grandparents, themselves devout Catholics, and it was this relationship which sowed the very earliest seeds of faith. As a young adult, the death of his grandmother prompted a desire to explore the Catholic faith and he began regularly attending the South East London parish to which his grandparents belonged for over sixty years. It was the welcome and support he found there which led him to attend a youth pilgrimage to Medjugorje, where he would experience profound spiritual transformation, 'It was a taste of Heaven on Earth... you could feel the Spirit in the atmosphere, and I realised that Jesus can get to every corner of the world. My faith really strengthened from that point onwards'.

From his narrative of spiritual journey, the impact of key people within the parish community who had inspired, guided and supported him was tangible, referred to with warmth as 'role models', 'teachers', 'God-sent'. It was through these relationships that he developed a love of the Rosary, which, in addition to being part of his daily prayer life, has become a visible sign of his Catholic identity and a powerful tool of evangelisation. 'I'm already an evangelist' he explained as he described carrying Rosary beads with him to give to those he meets, 'Through the Rosary, I feel I have been able to bring people closer to God who I think wouldn't normally have heard His voice'. In a moment, the young man had encapsulated the kerygmatic power of an authentic faith, which once received is joyously shared. When asked about the moment of reception into the Church at Easter, the young man reflected, 'I can't wait, I am really looking forward to my Baptism'.

Much has been written of late of the vast numbers leaving the Church, at a time when society seems to favour a very different value system, one of consumerism and individualism, in which religion is relegated to its own privatised realm. The narrative above however, presents a very different picture in which faith is actively chosen and pursued, serving as a powerful reminder that there are rich treasures to be found in the stories of people choosing to become Catholic in our culture today. It is precisely this desire to understand more fully the nature of contemporary Catholic conversion in Britain, that has become the focus of a three-year research project I am conducting at St Mary's University, Twickenham. My research aims to explore the profile of people choosing to become Catholic in parishes across the Archdiocese of Southwark and the motivations and experiences that have influenced them along the way. Early findings point towards significant patterns and trends: the network of relationships involved in nourishing the spark of religious enquiry, the importance of role models to guide and inspire and the significance of the Rosary as a powerful tool of transmission and prayer.

As an observer at the Rite of Election at St George's Cathedral on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2019, the drama and journey of religious conversion was immediately visible in the beautiful symbolism of the ceremony. Often referred to as the second major gateway of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), the Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion declares the Catechumens (those not baptised) and the Candidates (the baptised seeking full communion with the Church) ready to become enrolled among the elect in preparation for the celebration of Easter. Of the 254 Catechumens and 160 Candidates present, each person was called by name, parish by parish and presented to Archbishop Peter Smith. The slowly growing number of individuals standing amidst the worshipping community represented a profound image of call and response, of visual witness and of belonging - a powerful

reminder that God's call is capable of being heard above the frenetic pace of life and the 24/7 cultural hum.

At one of the most challenging times in the Church's history, the Candidates and the Elect represent an encouraging sign of renewal, of strong faith which remains steady in the face of turbulence and uncertainty. We are becoming all too familiar with coverage of unused churches, enjoyed by sightseers rather than believers, but the sight of St George's Cathedral filled to capacity with a worshipping community numbering over a thousand, was an uplifting symbol of vibrancy and hope. Against the landscape of declining church attendance and disaffiliation, the service did much to convey the persistence and resilience of Catholicism - the sheer numbers pouring out on to the South Bank streets sending a message to onlookers, during an otherwise ordinary Saturday lunchtime, that something significant had taken place.

It is hoped that through the experiences of those who choose to become Catholic, it will be possible to present a unique snapshot of Catholic conversion for contemporary Britons and to shine an evangelising spotlight on those travelling in a distinctly counter cultural direction towards faith, in what promises to be an inherently hopeful and fruitful endeavour.

Taken from an article submitted for publication to the Catholic Herald in March 2019

## **16 APPENDIX F: EVANGELISING STRATEGIES IDENTIFIED BY RESEARCH**

### **PARTICIPANTS**

#### **Website presence and social media**

- The parish church website should provide clear links to online resources for those interested in the Catholic faith, which allow for exploration and encourage people to make contact, to ask questions and begin a discussion.
- Highlight the phone number for an appointed member of the parish team to enable people to get in touch and receive a quick/immediate response.
- Signposting to reliable and trustworthy Catholic sources e.g Word on Fire, Ascension presents, Sycamore & apps such as 'Hallow'.

#### **Opportunities for open communication between clergy and laity**

- Maintaining open communication channels between clergy and the community presented several invaluable opportunities to start conversations; one priest intentionally took trips into town wearing his vestments, noting that he was always pleasantly surprised how many people stopped and spoke to him, seemingly keen to engage.
- Other clergy spoke about the simple daily conversations in shops and out in the community which often led people to attend enquiry sessions at the Church.
- Early enquiry sessions via one-to-one meetings with the parish priest, can present as valuable opportunities to begin a relationship, signpost to resources and nurture early spiritual awakening.

### **The process of adult initiation**

- A recommendation for parishes to establish a flexible pathway of catechesis which effectively distinguishes between the needs of Candidates and Catechumens in relation to prior knowledge, belief and experience of Christianity.
- Individuals offered a choice of potential catechetical pathways:
  - one to one sessions with a member of the clergy or parish team – a chance to ask questions, voice concerns, explore areas of Catholic teaching etc
  - group environment comprising those with a similar or shared religious background

### **Opportunities for Mystagogy**

- Offer regular opportunities for Neophytes to come together in a group (not in RCIA), to share thoughts and experiences
- Assign each new Catholic a ‘buddy’ – e.g an experienced Catholic who will accompany them to Mass, devotions such as Adoration & Rosary.
- Harness enthusiasm, hopes and desires of new Catholics for involvement and participation in the Church & to evangelise others.



## 17 APPENDIX G – DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

Students are reminded that the work that they submit for assessment must be their own.

Please read the following statements and sign and date at the bottom of this form to show that you have complied:

1. This thesis and the work to which it refers are the results of your own efforts. Any ideas, data or text resulting from the work of others (whether published or unpublished) are fully identified as such within the work and attributed to the originator in the text, bibliography or footnotes.

2. This thesis has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other academic degree or professional qualification at this or any other institution.

3. Any chapters that describe the outcomes of joint research should be clearly identified as such with a statement inserted as a footnote on the first page and contributors named.

Significant data, images or text resulting from the input of other researchers should be identified as such and attributed to the persons concerned by means of a footnote within the chapter.

4. It is usual to acknowledge the help and guidance of others who have assisted you during your research and preparation of your thesis. Such acknowledgements do not replace or obviate the need for individual attribution as discussed in points 1 and 3.

5. The University reserves the right to submit electronic versions of your draft documents for assessment of plagiarism using electronic detection software such as ‘turnitin’. In addition, whether or not drafts have been so assessed, the University reserves the right to require an electronic version of the final document (as submitted) for assessment.

SIGNED:.....

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NAME: SUSAN FRANCES LONGHURSt

DATE: 01.04.2022