



## ***From the Pews in the Back: Young Women & Catholicism***

### **READING GUIDE**

This reading guide includes many questions—we encourage you to pick and choose questions that fit your discussion group’s needs and interests.

A diverse group of Catholic women around the country—*From the Pews in the Back* contributors in the Boston area, college women in St. Louis, and Vatican II Catholic women in Olympia, Washington--developed these questions. We are indebted to their time and wisdom. And we are hopeful that their questions enrich and enliven your discussions and your own questions.

### **INTRODUCTION**

- What makes this generation of young adult Catholics Catholic, in spite of their differences from other generations? What unites them/us?
- Have you ever been confronted with similar questions of why aren’t more young people in church? Or why don’t you go to church? Or have you ever been the only young people in one of these situations? How did that feel?
- Given the pluralism of contemporary society, would previous generations of Catholics feel the need to define Catholic identity in the same way that this generation does?
- What comprises Catholic identity? Is it Catholic spirituality or is it more about the rituals, etc.? How would you describe the relationship between the two?
- Can you live a Catholic life without the sense of obligation to attend Mass on Sundays?
- How can a place of tension and frustration also be a place that people call home?
- How do different experiences of Catholicism enrich or detract from the universality of Catholicism?
- Are there times when you are “closeted” about your Catholicism? What are the situations that enable this experience? Can you be Catholic with some people and not with others?
- Is the process of negotiating between the tensions of “spirituality” and “religion” specific to younger generations of Catholics?
- Is the process of Catholic conscientization descriptive of this generation of Catholics, or can it include other generations, as well? How do women of this generation deal with the dissonance between being told that they can be anything they want to be within “secular” society but told that their roles are limited within their faith community? Is this negotiation a necessary step in developing an adult life of faith?
- What role does education play in asking questions of Catholicism?
- Does your experience growing up Catholic keep you from looking for other options (i.e. another denominational community)?
- What are our responsibilities as people claiming Catholicism? Do we have to stay in churches that are less comfortable in order to enact change and bring our voices, or should we find communities that are more like us and more comfortable?

- The Krista Tippett quote noted a difference between the truth and my truth. Where do you find a difference between the truth and my truth?
- There's so much for us as high schoolers, and we come back as visitors in college, but there doesn't seem to be much for us as young adults in parishes. Where is our place in the church?
- In the introduction of the chapters, do you see anything missing from the topics?

### **CHAPTER ONE: Growing Up Catholic**

- Looking back, what do you value most about your experiences growing up Catholic? How was your experience of growing-up Catholic influenced by your being female?
- Family seems very important to these authors. How would you hope to share your faith with your family?
- What experiences growing up Catholic do you now regret? What experiences remain with you?
- Will you have the same priorities in your families that you experienced as a child? Why or why not?
- Catholic ritual often binds people to Catholicism. What does Catholic ritual mean for you?
- What kind of value does the Church have in your family life? Do you feel drawn to raise your children with a religious tradition?
- How do different cultural heritages uniquely shape our experiences of Catholicism? Do our ethnic ties bind us to Catholicism more strongly than our faith beliefs?
- Eileen Campbell writes about realizing she could be Catholic in grey areas. What does that mean? Have you experienced that in your own life? How do you deal with grey areas of Catholicism?
- When did your “implied” Catholicism become apparent to you?
- What is the role of observation in the stories? How was Catholicism “learned” by the writers especially in looking at the women around them?
- Do you feel most Catholic when you are with other people or by yourself? Are there things that make you feel specifically Catholic – rosaries, incense, etc.?
- How do places become “sacred spaces” within the stories?
- Do people have shared experiences of Catholicism due to the fact that their parents came of age in the Catholic 1960s?
- When have you felt at home in your Catholicity? When have you felt unwelcome? How are you an insider? How are you an outsider?
- Who is a person who represented church to you? How do parents or other role models either aid or deter us from finding a home in the church?
- How does the communality of Catholicism make it harder to leave the Catholic Church than if it were simply a personal devotion?
- How might the experiences of people raised within Catholicism from a young age differ from those who returned to Catholicism at a later age or who converted to it later in life?

- Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello writes about her Confirmation process and the impact that the saint whose name she took has had on her life. During your Confirmation, which saint did you choose? What was your thought process behind it? What was your confirmation story? Would you change your confirmation saint now?
- Is it possible to reconcile feminism and Catholic identity? Will you put them on the same bookshelf in your house?
- Does the way we do the Sacraments make sense, or can we do them differently?
- Several of these stories seem to describe a moment of initiation into Catholic identity. How have you been initiated into your Catholic identity?
- Nelle Carty writes about a partner needing to light the Advent wreath. What are your “Advent wreath” qualities in a potential partner? How does faith come into play in romantic relationships?
- Sarah Keller writes about her first kiss in her essay. Who was your first kiss? Did your Catholic faith play a part in it?
- If we’re growing up Catholic, what happens when we actually *grow up*? Is there even a space for us in the church?
- Do the experiences within this book resonate with people who are of other denominations or religious traditions?

## **CHAPTER TWO: Faith in Action**

- In response to Kate Barch Heaton’s essay, how do you keep yourself accountable to your values? What’s the clutter in your life that keeps you from seeing what’s really necessary?
- What is true holiness? Can you be holy crawling along your closet, or does it need to be in a Catholic Worker house, or in front of the Blessed Sacrament?
- Have you had any “aha” moments or epiphanies – like the moment of crawling around in the closet – that brought you back to what is important?
- Like Jo March, Anne of Green Gables, and Dorothy Day, who are the figures who have captured your imagination, inspired you, and served as heroines for you?
- Recall Kate Lucas’ essay. Can an adult spirituality only develop and sustain itself within the margins of a faith tradition? Can you live in the margins and still feel at home in the center? What kind of space is in the margins? How does that allow us to stay in the church while also working for change?
- Lucas writes, “a healthy spiritual life is one where we live on the edges.” Is it better to be on the edges or in the center? What are the benefits and the struggles of each? What metaphor helps you define your placement in the church? Are you on the edge?
- Lucas also writes about being creative and merging your creative and religious sides. Just like the author used poetry, what helps you express your spirituality? Do you feel the Holy Spirit work through you in that?
- In response to Tefi Ma’ake’s story, could you be happy away from the religion you grew up in? What is it that seemed to bring these women back to the church? What is something that makes you want to leave the church? What is something that makes you want to stay?

- The church in the United States traditionally has been a church of immigrants. In light of that, what are the responsibilities of American Catholics toward immigrants within our contemporary society?
- How have interactions with various cultures and populations influenced your idea of being Catholic?
- In what social causes or movements might Catholics engage due to the teachings of our faith tradition?
- Have you had any prominent Catholics whom you may not have known personally but who have had a significant role in your faith development?
- How do you feel about Confession or the Sacrament of Reconciliation? Do women find it more difficult than men to go to confession given the discrepancy between the experiences of a celibate male and the experiences one faces as a woman?
- In Confession, what if one does not see “sin” as the priest sees “sin”? Why do I want to be absolved for something I do not consider sinful?
- The Catholic notion of salvation is tied to the coupling of faith and good works. Are faith-based actions that stem from such a theology uniquely Catholic in some way?
- Have you had formative service/volunteer experiences like those described by several of the authors? How have such experiences shaped your faith?
- In Nancy Olivas’ essay, she writes, “I was ready to return. On one condition.” Do you have “conditions” for your participation in the Catholic Church?
- Can leaving the Catholic Church become a way of preserving one’s Catholic faith?
- What role can questioning play in our faith?
- How is working for change in the Church similar to and different from working for change in society?
- Several of these women have to struggle with what is preached from the pulpit and what is practiced by those preachers. If you share in that struggle, how do you reconcile what is preached and what is practiced in Catholicism?
- Kate Lucas writes about vertical and horizontal theology. What does that mean to you? How do you see these active in your life?
- Catholic social teaching is a prominent theme in the lives of the women in this chapter. What part does Catholic social teaching play in your life?

### **CHAPTER THREE: Being a Catholic Woman**

- Where does feminism meet Catholicism?
- Kate Dugan and Jen Owens write about “the tension between the institution’s gender norms and our twenty-first-century expectations of being a woman.” What are the tensions that present themselves in being women, being Catholic, and being Church?

- Several authors write about an inability to leave Catholicism, even if they sometimes want to. Is this a source of joy or sadness? How much of being Catholic is really a choice?
- In Margaret Scanlon’s essay, she describes what she struggles with and what has kept her Catholic. Why do you stay? Have you thought about leaving or resisted staying? What do you tell people when they ask you why you stay in the Catholic Church?
- Scanlon writes, “... as a female Catholic, I am routinely told to model Mary – woman par excellence – instead of her Son, the Christ in whom I profess my faith.” What does Mary mean to you in your relationship to the Church?
- In response to Scanlon’s piece, what does it mean to be a “healthy Catholic?”
- Several of these stories spoke of the Eucharist. Do you see Eucharist outside of the celebration of the Mass (like the woman at Mother Theresa’s place in Haiti or the story of the nursing mother)?
- These stories also addressed things like psychosis and bulimia. Have you been in experiences where the church has helped you in your struggle of healing or wholeness?
- In moments of pain, what images come to mind and what do you fall back on? What provides comfort? Has loneliness or pain ever brought you closer to God?
- Deb Heimel describes the tensions of coming-out Catholic to gay people and coming-out gay to Catholics. What assumptions do we fear in coming-out Catholic to others? What are the tensions between what you think people think about you and your own beliefs and practices? Do you ever feel that you are not really Catholic?
- Jessica Coblenz writes, “It was either the Catholic Church, or my fundamental belief in Christ’s inclusive and liberating message for *all* people...” Must we choose, or can it be both?
- Coblenz had mentors in professors and campus ministers. Have you had mentors?
- Being a Catholic woman often involves entering into a specific community. How do you form community with other Catholic women, especially those whose beliefs are radically different from your own?
- Is it possible to be a Catholic woman and not struggle? Can there be some sort of freedom that stems from having to sift through the contradictions within Catholicism?
- How does the Millennial generation’s experience of being women (“be all you can be” – “girls can do anything they want to do”) complicate our experience of being Catholic women?
- Have you tried other churches? Have you felt spiritually at home in them? Why or why not?
- One author writes, “I look for God in where God is not.” Joan Chittister has said, “God is the mystery nobody wants.” Where do you find God?
- If you have left the church and come back, what brought you back?
- What family or cultural experiences enhanced or diminished your Catholicism?
- What adjustments, if any, have you made to remain Catholic?
- Do you think that men go through these kinds of struggles? Do they grapple with parallel issues or ideas? Like Egan’s story about breastfeeding, are there certain experiences that a Catholic woman

can understand that Catholic men can't understand? Are there experiences of Catholic manhood that Catholic women can't understand?

- How do the images we see shape our understanding of God and humanity? What images would you like to see better incorporated in the life of the Church?

#### **CHAPTER FOUR: Vocation**

- Where does being feminist meet your vocation?
- In Pearl Barros' essay, Grandma's rules can be broken, but the pope's can't. Whose rules can we break, and whose rules do we have to obey? Who should be making the rules?
- How did you receive "the rules"? What in your life brought you to the point where you were able to begin to question "the rules"?
- Barros also refers to a feeling of "gut-level certainty" in her essay. Have you experienced this? What was it about?
- Have you spent time discerning your vocation? Have you felt you had support from the Church? From other Catholic women? From your peers? Did you ever consider any form of vowed religious life as a possible vocation? What motivated your discernment?
- Several of the authors in this section explicitly reference, or implicitly deal with, the notion of "black and white" thinking as it relates to their experiences of the Catholic Church, and yet it is in navigating the gray areas and places of discord that their vocations flourish. Do you think of Catholicism as "black and white?" Have you had experiences that have caused you to challenge this kind of thinking, in the Church or in yourself?
- Kate Henley Averett attributes her roommate with this statement, "God wouldn't give you a vocation that you weren't able to fulfill." Do you agree or disagree with that? Why?
- Averett also writes, "All I really wanted was for my potential vocation to be taken seriously and my time of discernment to be acknowledged, honored, and supported." Have you found ways in which your community has supported or helped you discern your vocation? Has your vocation been stunted or ignored by the community?
- Where do the limitations on women being priests or bishops come from--society? God?
- Felicia Schneiderhan relays an experience during Mass of feeling "powerless" and "voiceless." Have you had experiences within the Church of feeling this way? Have these feelings helped or hindered you in discerning or living out your vocation?
- Schneiderhan writes, "It's hard to separate the religion from my faith?" What do you make of that division? Does it resonate in your experience? Does it look like something different for you?
- Schneiderhan also writes, "Few things are as exhilarating as when you see your creation surpass your expectations and become more than you ever imagined it to be." How have you been surprised by that? How does your creativity influence your spirituality?
- Several women in this chapter discuss feelings of being called to ordained priesthood. Do you think this is God working in them? Can such vocations exist?

- When do you think about what you are “called” to do in life (whether it be business, teaching, law, etc) as vocation? Is working for social change a vocation? Do you think of professions, passions, etc as vocations or does that word only refer to marriage or religious life?
- Rebecca Curtin writes about Catholicism that in it, “faithfulness must necessarily involve community.” (166) Do you agree with this statement? Do your experiences within the Church, and of your own personal faith, support or refute it? Is being “alone together” itself a form of community?
- How do you save religion, as Claire Bischoff puts it? Who, what saves it for you? How do you save it for yourself? What motivates you to save it? Why is it worth saving?
- As Vatican II Catholic women discussed these chapters, we realized that the definition of “vocation” has shifted in the generations. The women in chapter four have quite expansive definitions while Vatican II Catholics grew up thinking of vocation as only being a nun or priest. How do you define vocation?
- What struggles have you witnessed, in your own life or in the lives of others? What were the struggles of the women around you? Have the women who were important in your life been helpful, receptive to your struggles, or do they hold onto something different?
- When we envision a new church, how will we know which things are true and good, and which are the empty trappings of religion? Which traditions and laws do we keep? Which things are empty without the proper spirit behind them? How will we know?
- Who was the most influential person in your life in helping you unearth your possible vocation? How did he or she influence you?

### **CHAPTER FIVE: Spiritual Identity**

- It seems that everyone in this section of the collection has a kind of hook that brings her back to the church, i.e. for Becky Fullan, it’s Jesus. Do you have a hook that continues to bring you back to the church? If you do, what is it?
- It seems that many of the authors have different ways of experience the Divine. In what ways do you experience the Divine?
- What are the alternatives to Catholicism that the authors of this sections are considering? Have you considered alternatives? If you do, what makes them compelling? What makes them less than compelling?
- In several of these essays, authors describe aspects of their faith or Catholic identity that make sense and others that they feel defy logic. Which make sense to you? Which are more difficult to explain?
- Many of the women in this chapter write about their strong roots in Catholicism. If you have a similarly strong religious background, why do you stay Catholic? Or why not?
- What role does community play in your Catholic identity?
- Eileen Markey writes, “The presence of doubt is what makes the church ring true.” Do you feel that doubt is integral to your faith? If yes, why? If not, why not?

- Markey also writes about the tough decisions she has to make about her young son’s religious education. How have you made the decision about your kids’ religious education?
- For Markey, choosing to raise her child Catholic was like starting all over again. How do you think your parents felt in giving you your religious heritage? How do you feel about the prospect of raising children in your faith tradition? Is your church something you would feel comfortable bringing people to?
- Markey writes, “I love this church and I also can’t, in good faith, profess membership in this organization that fosters inequality, refuses to truly repent for wrongdoing, and distrusts the fresh air of argument.” By staying, are you tacitly assenting to how the church operates?
- What does your faith mean to you? What does your religion mean to you?
- Kate Lassiter writes on page 216, “The Catholic Church needs me in order to be fully awake to the fullness of creation.” What words of wisdom can you offer the Church?
- Lassiter also observes that the Church is not a democracy. But what would happen if the Church were a democracy? What would it require of Catholics?
- Lassiter suggests that she didn’t choose the church but the church chose her. How do you feel that the church chose you or that you chose the church?
- How does the church affect your spirituality? What is the difference between religion and spirituality? How do they relate to each other?
- Several authors seemed to have spirituality informed by a number of different religions. Has something like that happened to you? Can spirituality transgress the boundaries of religious difference?
- How do we understand truth in relationship to the church and our own spirituality?

### **CONCLUSION**

- If you were to write a piece for this book, what would it be about? What is your story? Given what you’ve read and your own lived experience, how do you define the church?
- What is your vision for the future of the church? How can you bring that about?
- How can you be in dialogue with those Catholics who might not value the perspective that these essays present?
- Where did you find yourself in this community of authors?
- In the introduction to this chapter, Jen Owens adapted the profession of faith. How do we reconcile our own creed with the creed of the church? How do we stay with the things that we can’t quite profess?
- Many of these women write about their images of God. What is your image of God? How does God exist in your life?
- How much of this is universal and could be translated to other places? How much is culturally bound?

- These young women are writing from a particular time in their lives. Where will these women be in 10, 15, or 20 years? How do you imagine their perspectives will change?
- Many of these women either do not have children or only have young children. How do you think their perspectives and experiences will influence the next generation of Catholics?
- Several of these young women do not describe going to Mass—don't seem to link Mass or parish involvement as a necessarily essential part of being Catholic. Is it possible that this is a generation of Catholics freed from Mass obligation? Why or why not?
- There are not too many stories in this collection about parish life. What does this seeming lack of parish involvement mean for the future of the Church?
- How do these women identify as Catholic? How do they say, "I'm Catholic"? Why?
- Is being a part of a Catholic community important to you? Why or why not?
- What is the place in the wider Catholic church and identity for this kind of personal narrative?
- What is your overall feeling after reading this?
- Who would you share this book with?
- How does this community and other like-minded people fit into the American church and the broader, world-wide church?
- Whose voices are missing in this book?
- Where do we go from here?

**Contributors:**

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