

Last month the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released the study, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” tracking the religious affiliations of Americans. While the study’s findings were not surprising, they were sobering, especially for Catholics.

Americans are a notoriously mobile and untethered lot, and this is as true of our religious commitments as of our employment, marital, or geographical ties. According to the Pew survey, 44 percent of adults have switched religious affiliations, either exchanging one Protestant denomination for another or converting to another religion altogether—or to no religion at all. The percentage of the adult population that is unaffiliated with any religion is now 16.1 percent, double what it was in the 1980s. Religiously unaffiliated Americans are, in fact, the fastest growing group surveyed in the study. Especially significant is the fact that one in four Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine does not identify with any religious community.

Given the voluntary and congregational nature of many Protestant churches, it is not surprising that denominational identity has long been fluid. What was perhaps surprising is the large defection from the Catholic Church. According to the Pew survey, the Catholic Church has suffered the greatest loss in absolute numbers, with approximately one-third of those raised Catholic saying they no longer belong to the church. Close to 10 percent of all Americans, the survey notes, are former Catholics, most of whom find new homes in other churches. Despite this massive hemorrhaging, the Catholic Church continues to comprise nearly a quarter of all religiously affiliated adults. Converts to Catholicism account for some of this, but immigration is the real reason the number of adult Catholics has held steady. The vast majority of immigrants, especially immigrants from Latin America, are Catholics. Remarkably, 45 percent of all Catholics eighteen to twenty-nine years of age are Latino.

What lessons Catholics, especially church leaders, should take from the survey’s findings is already being fiercely debated. Some blame the church’s authoritarian character, its contested teachings about sexual morality, its failure to grant equal status to women, and of course the sexual-abuse scandal and the bishops’ complicity in those crimes. Others argue the church has been too lax in upholding its teachings, going too far in accommodating the values and attitudes of contemporary American society. The post-Vatican II church, these critics claim, has alienated believers not by being countercultural, but by compromising its mission and diluting its distinctive identity.

There are elements of truth to both points of view. Institutional loyalties of every kind have weakened in the past half-century. Catholics should be able to agree that there is an ongoing catechetical crisis and a need to celebrate and defend what is distinctive about Catholicism. Once a thick web of Catholic institutions passed on the faith and imprinted a robust Catholic identity on the young. Since the demise of the Catholic subculture in the 1960s and the subsequent loss of tens of thousands of priests and religious women, the church has struggled to find new forms of evangelization and enculturation. As the Pew study reminds us, reaching young adults, many of whom put off marriage and children to continue their schooling and begin careers, is an especially difficult challenge.

Living and teaching the faith is a Catholic’s first responsibility. Changed circumstances require new strategies, however, and sometimes different answers to disputed questions. Church structures have a history, and so does doctrine. The vitality of American Catholicism will not be restored by a return to the clerical prerogatives of the past. Episcopal authority is essential, but a better way must also be found to incorporate lay leadership and lay ministry into the church. Subsidiarity should begin in the pews. Greater institutional transparency, especially in financial and pastoral matters, is a first step. Some role for the laity in selecting bishops is a traditional practice that needs to be seriously considered again. Given the threat posed to the church’s sacramental life by the priest shortage, the hierarchy’s refusal to even discuss ordaining married men or ordaining women to the diaconate is also shortsighted. Among the best educated and most generous Catholics in the world, Americans expect their priests and bishops to teach but also to listen. In that light, the unintelligibility to most people of the teachings

about contraception and homosexuality continues to undermine the church's credibility on more fundamental issues, such as abortion. Issues like these are not going away.

Yes, many Catholics have drifted from the church, and those who remain are often polarized. Yet no Catholic can take satisfaction in learning that the church has lost a third of its members. The church in America must give a better account of the hope that is in us.