

THE CATHOLIC CONVERSION PROCESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study used a qualitative research methodology to investigate the spiritual and life experiences of undergraduate students who convert to Catholicism at Texas State University in San Marcos. Specifically, it explores the conversion narratives to the Catholic faith through their involvement at Our Lady of Wisdom University Parish (OLOW), which is adjacent to the university. Data consisted of individual interviews with five current Texas State students, one life story narrative submitted by a recent Texas State graduate via Facebook, individual interviews with the priest and deacon of OLOW, a focus group comprised of three individual interview participants, and the researcher's own observations. The findings were analyzed using qualitative methodology and yielded an initial model relating to the process of conversion with four stages comprised of multiple themes within each stage. Participants were selected through non-random convenience sampling. Data was collected using a semi-structured format. This study is important since it adds to the scholarly literature investigating the religious conversion process for contemporary university students, particularly regarding the Catholic faith.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It was recently announced that as of March 13, 2013, the Catholic Church would have a new pope—Pope Francis. I was writing this thesis in a very public coffee shop when I was alerted that there had been white smoke coming from the chimney above the Sistine Chapel in Rome, signaling to the world that the Cardinals of the Catholic Church had elected a new pope to immediately succeed Pope Benedict XVI following his historic resignation earlier this year. I stopped working and got on the Vatican website to watch the new pope greet the people at St. Peter's Square—in a live feed, I might add.

Words cannot describe my emotions at that moment, knowing that as a young Catholic trying to find her way in the world, I had someone to look up to and help guide me forward in my pursuit to live a holy life. Maybe one emotion could be said: embarrassment. I was sitting in a crowded coffee shop with tears of joy streaming down my face, and I couldn't stop crying! All I wanted to do was go home and celebrate with my friends, but I was afraid I'd miss something from the live news feed, so I stayed in the shop, crying my eyes out, and trying not to jump out of my seat in pure happiness.

I couldn't help but think of the odd situation that I was in as I sat there and wrote a thesis about Catholic conversion while all this was happening. Popes have historically been chosen as the people who would best spread the Gospel of Christ, usually in life threatening situations. The Catholic Church believes that

the pope is the direct successor to St. Peter, who travelled around teaching and converting people until he was eventually martyred.

As I watched Pope Francis walk out onto the balcony, I was watching the direct effect of St. Peter's willingness to make sure that the world learned more about Christ every day, and because of that, we still have people learning about the faith and growing closer to God—and the Church lives on, even two thousand years later.

This thesis, while it has been exhausting and frustrating, and everything I never wanted to do during Spring Break of my senior year in college, has brought me a new perspective on this historic time in the Church. At first, my curiosity at why young people want to convert to Catholicism was the reason this thesis was even being written. Since I never converted out of one faith and into another (I am what is colloquially known as a “Cradle Catholic,” meaning I grew up Catholic) I am overjoyed and excited to talk to people who have taken this step of faith and who have very often had to defy their families to do so.

Now, I have another reason for wanting to write this thesis. I am going to be a Catholic missionary as soon as I graduate from Texas State University—I am going to help people better understand the Catholic faith. These people that I will be interviewing throughout my thesis process have seen something beautiful and attractive about the Catholic Church. While I could tell you all the beautiful things that I see, knowing their reasons for joining the Church will just add to my own knowledge base and maybe help me to see things differently than I had

before. In a small way, I will too be following in the footsteps of Peter as I share my own story, and other people's stories about the Catholic Church.

This momentous time in the Church's history is coinciding with this similarly momentous occasion in my own faith journey as I end one chapter in my faith life and begin another. When I write out these people's stories, I gain perspective into their choices and understanding of the faith—and into my own. Although relatively small in number, these participants taught me a lot about how I look at the world, and bring refreshing life to the Catholic Church.

This thesis, while it has been exhausting and frustrating, and everything I never wanted to do during Spring Break of my senior semester in college, it has brought me a new perspective on this historic time in the Church. My curiosity at why young people want to convert to this faith that is telling them that the path to happiness is not simply acting on what you “feel like doing,” and that suffering is actually a good thing when you look at it the right way, was the reason this thesis is being written. Myself having never converted out of one faith and into another (I am what is colloquially known as a “Cradle Catholic,” meaning I grew up Catholic) I am overjoyed and excited to talk to people who have taken this step of faith and who have very often had to defy their families to do so.

This momentous time in the Church is coinciding with this momentous occasion in my faith journey as I write out these people's stories and give perspective into a group of people who, although relatively small in number, bring refreshing life to the Catholic Church.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conversion can be defined in general as a process through which a person chooses to enter a faith by leaving another religion or by moving from no religious affiliation. As used specifically by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2010), the official summary of principles, conversion refers to "choosing to follow in the footsteps of Christ" or "turning of the person's desires to follow those of Christ that should happen daily." For individuals who specifically affiliate with Catholicism, the Church exhorts its members to have "daily conversions from sin and toward Christ." This thesis will specifically avoid any theological discussion of the specific meaning of conversion to Catholicism. Rather, conversion will be used broadly to refer to both the process of changing faith affiliation to Catholicism as well as the outcome of joining the Church. [For a further discussion of conversion, see Bailey & Bailey (1991) and Maloney & Southard (1992).]

Roman Catholicism is a clearly defined organized religion within the Christian faith, and it is distinct from Orthodoxy and Protestantism. There are criteria that largely distinguish religions including authority, ritual, explanations, tradition, grace, and mystery (Smith, 1994). While all Christian faiths are based on the Bible, they differ in their interpretation. The Council of Trent in (1545-1563) clarified Catholic teaching in comparison to Protestantism. Although several important distinctions emerged, there are three main areas of difference. Catholics "assert the authority of the Church tradition and the infallibility of the

Vatican's pronouncements about essentials of the faith [and] the doctrine of salvation by both faith and good works [and] the mediation of God's grace through officials of the Church" (Fisher, 2009, p. 204). Further, the Catholic Church maintains the seven sacraments (Protestants only adhere to baptism and the Eucharist) as well as significant doctrines, such as transubstantiation, confession, priestly celibacy, monasticism, purgatory, and the intercession of saints in heaven on behalf of the living (Brodd *et al*, 2013). There are also important philosophical teachings within the contemporary Catholic Church, such as the "New Evangelization," a term coined by the late Pope Paul IV (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 1975). A further discussion of Catholic doctrine is beyond the scope of this thesis (see the Catechism).

There are many different ways that people define themselves as "Catholic." For this discussion, the terms "cultural Catholic" and "converted Catholic" will be used to describe how Catholics define themselves. "Cultural Catholic" describes a person who was essentially raised Catholic and remains Catholic (sometimes called "cradle Catholic"). "Converted Catholic" describes a person who was not raised Catholic, yet at some point in his or her life, chose to convert to the Catholic faith. This thesis focuses exclusively on "converted Catholics."

In order for a person who was not previously affiliated with the Catholic Church to join the Church within the United States, he/she must go through the process known as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). This process takes the person through the steps deemed necessary to receive the

Sacraments of Initiation, which are Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation. The word “sacrament” refers to the rituals used by the Church to “strengthen the relationship of the people to Jesus Christ” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2010). For more information on sacraments and their role in the Catholic faith, see the Catechism.

The terms “religion” and “spirituality” are complex and difficult to define. They can be the same thing for many people, yet they are distinctly different. As defined by Canda and Furman (2010), spirituality is “a universal and fundamental aspect of what it is to be human—to search for a sense of meaning, purpose, and moral frameworks for relating with self, others, and the ultimate reality.” In contrast, religion is defined as “an institutionalized pattern of beliefs, behaviors, and experiences, oriented toward spiritual concerns, and shared by a community and transmitted over time in traditions.” These terms can be used both dependently and independently. That is, “whether persons identify themselves as primarily religious, primarily spiritual, both religious and spiritual, or neither” (Hutchison, 2011a). The Catholic Church is regarded as an organized religion that, for many of its adherents, also represents a personal spiritual path.

The United States is a highly religious country within a secular culture. It is the most religiously diverse country in the world, with more than 1500 groups (Pew Forum, 2011). A 2012 Gallup poll found that almost 60% of Americans stated that they belonged to a church or synagogue (40% actually attended weekly), and that religion is “very important” in their life (Gallup, 2013). In contrast, another Gallup survey (2013) found that over 70% thought that religion

was losing influence in daily life and only slightly more than half (55%) felt that religion could solve modern problems.

The demographics of religious affiliation and conversion seem to be constantly shifting in the United States. This phenomenon is described by Hutchison (2011a) as “religion switching” in which a person changes from one religion to another within one’s lifetime. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2010a), Christianity is the overwhelming majority with 78.4% of Americans identifying as Christian and 23.9% of Americans identifying as Catholic. “Other religions” account for only 4.7% of Americans, and is separated into Jewish (1.7%), Buddhist (0.7%), Muslim (0.6%), Hindu (0.4%), other world religions (<0.3%), and “other faiths” (1.2%). Of note, 16.1% of Americans identify as “unaffiliated,” that is separated into three subcategories: Atheist (1.6%), Agnostic (2.4%), and “secular” (12.1%). “Men are significantly more likely than women to claim no religious affiliation. Nearly one-in-five men say they have no formal religious affiliation, compared with roughly 13% of women.”

The Pew Forum study (2010a) asserts that the Catholic Church in the United States has experienced the greatest net loss of members. Skirbekk, Kaufmann, and Goujon (2010) note that, “Religious conversion reduces the number of Catholics by 15.5 million and those from other religions by 2 million” (p. 303). While many cultural Catholics have left the Church (7.5% according to the Pew Forum, 2008), the overall proportion of Catholics (almost 25%) has remained the same since the early 1970s. This decline is off-set by at least three factors: the small number of people who change their religious affiliation to

Catholicism (estimated at 2.6% of the total U.S. population); the high number of Catholics among immigrants to the United States (particularly from Latin America); and, the high fertility rate of some Catholic subgroups. Depending upon these trends, in the next thirty years, the total number of Catholics could rise above the number of Protestants in the U.S. (Skirbekk, Kaufmann & Goujon, 2010). According to Hutchison (2011a), many non-Christian religions are the fastest growing in the United States, although their numbers are still relatively small compared to the proportion of self-identified Christians in the U.S.

Another Pew Foundation study (2011) further clarifies this religious switching. This survey describes that 71% of people who were raised Catholic, yet are now unaffiliated, gradually drifted away from the faith. Of these respondents, 54% converted to Protestantism. Of the former Catholics who are now unaffiliated, 65% stopped believing in the religion's teachings, and 43% felt that their spiritual needs were not being met. As for the specific teachings identified by unaffiliated former Catholics, 56% were dissatisfied with teachings on abortion and/or homosexuality, 48% with teachings on birth control, and 33% with teachings on divorce and marriage. Although there have been highly visible scandals within the Catholic Church in recent years, such as the priest pedophilia scandal, only 27% of people who leave Catholicism for an unaffiliated religion cite that as a reason. Finally, this study reports that one-in-ten American adults have left the Catholic Church (10.1%), while only 2.6% of adults have become Catholic.

There are generational differences in these patterns. Hutchison (2011a) explains religion switching as the result of a cultural change in America stemming from the Baby Boomers, who were a “generation of seekers.” This influential cohort helped to solidify conversion as a mindset of modern Americans. “Millennials” are defined as the generational group who are currently age 18 to 29, which encompasses the typical college-aged cohort. This group is less likely to have a religious affiliation (Pew Forum 2010b). Further, the “strong” Catholic identity among “young” adults in the United States is at a four-decade low (Pew 2013). There are very few people converting to Catholicism, and the declining desire among young adults to ascribe to any religious affiliation may indicate at least one powerful reason for why the Catholic Church is losing so many “cultural Catholics.”

The Pew Research Center (2010b) states that the demographic cohort known as “Millennials” are less religious than older Americans. One in four college-aged people identify as unaffiliated, whether as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.” Compared to older Americans, less than one fifth of people in their thirties are unaffiliated, with only 15% of those in their forties, and 10% or less are unaffiliated in their sixties. Overall, according to another study by Pew Research Forums (2011), “strength of faith” declined from most major religions, while secularism is on the rise. For this thesis, “college students” will be used synonymously with “millennials.”

The Catholic identity is a possible reason explaining why people choose to convert to Catholicism. The word “catholic” means “universal.” Charles (1993)

offers a discussion on the plurality of the contemporary Catholic culture when he observes that this term describes new groupings and lifestyles, greater cultural differentiation, and a wide range of spiritual options. Hunt (1993) suggests that a religion is an identity marker, something that connects an individual to others who believe in similar things (i.e., creating a shared identity.) After World War II, Roman Catholicism and the American image converged for the first time. Yet, as a result of declining numbers overall, the very idea of the “Catholic identity” is increasingly difficult to define. If so many cultural Catholics are leaving the faith and if the Catholic identity is getting weaker in the general society, this leads to a question of what factors motivate someone to join the Catholic faith, especially among college-age people and especially during a time of turmoil for the Church. [For a further discussion of the current “crisis” in the Roman Catholic Church in America, see Steinfels (2013).]

There are powerful motivators for conversion. Multiple studies suggest that faith adds to a person’s complete well-being. Wedig (2006) suggests that college-aged students convert to Catholicism in a search for “postmodern realism.” That is, as a way to cope with modern life and help them to deal with the difficult realities that come with it. In this argument, the Catholic Church offers young people both a way to incorporate and resist the cultural forces of the day, something that many college students are seeking. [It should be noted that this thesis is not specifically referring to students at Catholic colleges; for a discussion of this particular group, see Hunt (2005).]

There is a considerable body of literature that indicates the physical and mental health benefits of religious affiliation. Religious involvement improves a person's holistic well-being, and religion has a particularly positive impact on preventing or limiting certain diseases (Glicker, 2007). Further, religious people tend to live longer, have less anxiety, and cope better with stressful situations. Spirituality is found to be a positive predictor of mental health, physical health, positive coping, social support, and recovery from substance abuse, trauma and grief (Hutchison, 2011a). In addition, spirituality is associated with improved individual quality of life and collective well-being.

The Pew Foundation (2011) study asked specifically about attendance at "worship service." Those respondents identified as "unaffiliated" reported that service attendance dropped dramatically after their teenage years. The adolescent years of a person's psychosocial development are crucial to identity formation, and it is during this stage that most people begin to make their own decisions about their faith. Perhaps the people who reported to simply "drift away" from religious practice did so because they were no longer attending religious services at a time when they were developmentally ready to make decisions about their faith.

While the literature may suggest that college-aged students are uninterested in organized religion, a study by the Higher Education Research Institute (2007) suggests that college-aged students are aware of a spiritual aspect of life. According to their study, "there is a high level of spiritual engagement and commitment among college students, with more than half

placing a high value on 'integrating spirituality' in their lives (58%), 77% saying 'we are all spiritual beings,' and 71% indicating they 'gain spiritual strength by trusting in a higher power.'" The report further asserts that 40% of college students say that it is essential to seek out opportunities to grow spiritually, and another 35% of say it is essential to find answers to the "mysteries of life." In addition, 51% say that they believe in the sacredness of life to a great extent, and 41% believe they have an interest in spirituality to a great extent.

The findings that some college-aged people are actively seeking deeper spiritual fulfillment makes sense. The research shows that developmentally, college-aged people are ready to pursue higher thinking not only in academics, but also in their spiritual lives. Wedig (2006) notes that, at the college age, people are eager for a church community that can sustain them in very fast paced contemporary times.

College-aged students may be developmentally ready to start making their own choices about their faith journey. According to Hawkins (2005), "spirituality is a universal construct that is woven throughout the life span, although it is expressed in individual ways." Fowler's Stages of Faith Development (1981) suggests that, beginning in young adulthood; people may go through a stage in their lives when they have to choose for themselves what their faith is, independent from their childhood upbringing. The person "constructs an individual self (identity) and outlook (ideology) from previously held conventional faith... [The] goal is to create a rational, workable, and personal worldview or faith" (Hutchison, 2011b). While it is evident from the literature that people

develop their faith across the life span, there is no clear indication as to why certain young people would choose to convert to Catholicism. [For a historical review of religious conversion among college students, see Zinnbauer & Pargament (1998).]

The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA), the formal process by which an individual converts to Catholicism, can span from a few months to a few years, depending on the motivation of the person completing the program. However, RCIA culminates on Holy Saturday during the Easter Vigil, where the candidates within the program receive their Sacraments of Initiation and are received into the Church. For detailed information about RCIA, see the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2010). The RCIA process is distinct from theological training in divinity school or religious studies programs offered at lay persons at many Catholic or non-Catholic universities. Tripole (1979) suggests that the general study of theology facilitates finding deeper meaning in relation to the world. Ideally, the study of theology will awaken the person to seek a true perception of the Christian faith experience in an ongoing life-long process.

There are a surprisingly limited number of scholarly sources on Catholic conversion among U.S. college students, and these are quite dated. Wedig (2006) observes that, in relation to college-aged students undergoing RCIA specifically, “one of the most important and vital features of the university RCIA has been the way Christian community integrates liturgy, preaching, religious education, personal morality, and social ethics. The university by its nature is meant to draw seemingly diverse things together.” This analysis notes the

fundamental similarities between the RCIA learning process and the inherent education from the university education for students undergoing the RCIA program while still in college.

The scholarly literature on conversion contains a wide array of articles describing the process. In the past, conversion has been described as a rapid or sudden change, as if something quickly "grabs you and changes you" (Allison, 1966; Roberts, 1965; Stanley, 1964). However, later scholarship argued that the process of conversion is a more gradual one. The Lofland-Stark Model is the most widely cited description of religious conversion (Snow and Phillips, 1980). This study addresses the ideas of "predisposing" factors and "situational" factors based on a field study of conversion to cult "religions." [For more information on what is historically called "deviant religious conversion," see Parrucci (1968) and Allison (1969).] Kox, Meeus, and Hart (1991) assess that the Lofland-Stark model "offers a fairly adequate set of *conditions* of conversion, but is inadequate as a model for the *process* of conversion." More recently, Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2004) discuss a theory of sudden conversion that is associated with insecure early infant attachment (as opposed to secure), although this model is beyond the scope of this paper. [For more information on attachment theory as a model of conversion, see Kirkpatrick (1992).]

Two paradigms of conversion proposed by Granqvist (2003) are classic and contemporary. The "classic" approach portrays conversion as occurring either during distress, or as being sudden and completely life-changing. The "contemporary" approach, however, describes conversion as being more

gradual, and less life-altering experience. Within the notion of conversion being gradual, McKanan (2006) offers an exploration of Catholic conversions for people who lived within intentional communities affiliated with either the Catholic Worker Movement or the Camphill Movement. This study asserts that "conversion... is more often a wayward journey than a flash of light. Individual participants may discover a new religious identity."

Another paradigm associated with conversion is a "passive" rather than an "active" approach, as described by Straus (1979). This model asserts that a passive conversion happens to the person, while active conversion is an accomplishment of a person who is actively engaging their own process. Straus acknowledges that conversion is a process that is very difficult to conceptualize. However, no matter the mode of conversion undertaken by a person, Paloutzian, Richardson, and Rambo (1999) found that religious conversion can "result in profound, life transforming changes in mid-level functions such as goals, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors, and in the more self-defining personality functions such as identity and life meaning. This seems to be so whether the process of conversion is sudden or gradual, active or passive, and to a traditional Western or Eastern religion, or to a new religious movement."

The models of conversion are dependent upon personal agency to choose a new religion. Agency is defined as the ability for people to make their own choices in life (Hutchison, 2011b). According to Barro, Hwang, and McCleary (2010), the religious conversion rates of forty countries studied showed that the rates were positive in countries with greater religious pluralism and higher levels

of education. Religious conversion rates were negative in countries with government restrictions on religious conversion and a history of communism. A similar study conducted by Woods (2011) found that that agency played a significant role in religious conversion. [For deeper discussion of agency and religious conversion, see Keane (1997) and Kilbourne & Richardson (1989).]

In another approach, Lofland and Skonovd (1981) described different styles of conversion: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive. Rambo (1993) theorizes that conversion is a process that involves seven dimensions: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. In order to evaluate this theory, Kahn and Greene (2004) conducted a study using the "Adult Religious Conversion Experiences Questionnaire" (ARCEQ) with adult volunteers (n=110) who claimed to have had a conversion experience. This study asserted that five of the seven dimensions of conversion stated by Rambo matched up to the sample's experience. Of the two other dimensions, "interaction" had less reliability and "context" was dropped due to low reliability rate.

While there are many different theories on conversion, it is important to note that there is much debate among scholars about the nature of conversion and even the definition of this term. From the beginning of the study of religious conversion, the literature generated very little agreement due to the many different and opposing schools of thought (Scroggs & Douglas, 1966). Heirich (1977) clearly outlines this lack of consensus and critiques conventional arguments. "For at least a century, a debate has raged between social scientists

and religionists and among social sciences themselves about what is really going on when the phenomenon described as religious conversion occurs.” Pitt (1991) reiterates this ongoing disagreement on the nature of conversion and continued lack of agreement on even a definition. Rambo (1999) admonishes scholars of conversion to be aware of theoretical issues and the need to only use available theoretical options with sophistication.

This thesis is relevant to the study of religious conversion for several reasons. While there is substantial research exploring why people leave the Catholic Church, there is very limited current research on why people convert to Catholicism, particularly among college-age students. The scholarly literature offers a few stories of conversion, such as Allitt (2000), Titon (1980), and Neuhaus (1988), although there are many non-scholarly conversion stories available on the internet. None of these, however, focus on the college-aged demographic group. There is more research exploring why people leave the Catholic Church. This thesis conducts a qualitative exploratory study examining the reasons why a select sample of students choose to convert to Catholicism while enrolled at a large, public university in the southwest region of the U.S. and attending a student-oriented Catholic Church adjacent to campus.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Ethical Guidelines

Particular attention was given during the planning of this research study to ensure that ethical guidelines were followed in the protection of human subjects. The Texas State Institutional Review Board was consulted on the design. It was determined that the study was eligible for exempt status, meaning that the study did not require a full review since it posed no significant threat to the well-being of the participants.

As discussed by Rubin and Babbie (2011a), there are six broad categories of ethical issues in the conduct of social work research: 1) voluntary participation and informed consent, 2) no harm to participants, 3) anonymity and confidentiality, 4) deceiving subjects, 5) analysis and reporting, and 6) weighing benefits and costs. Each of these concerns was specifically addressed when applying for and receiving exemption status from the IRB.

Both the individual interviews (student participants and key informants) and the focus group (student participants) asked for information that entailed minimal risk, since they focused on the Catholic beliefs and/or experiences of people who are members of the faith. They were particularly asked about their conversion process, either in the past or present. Informed consent was fully explained and participants were required to give verbal voluntary agreement prior to engaging in the study. A copy of the consent form is provided in Appendix A. All participants were given a copy of the consent form. Safeguards to

confidentiality were implemented. Participants were encouraged to disclose within their own comfort level.

Qualitative Research Methodology

This study was planned and implemented using a qualitative research design. In contrast to quantitative hypothesis-based research methods, in which numerical data are collected for statistical analysis, qualitative data are narrative. According to Rubin and Babbie (2011b), “qualitative research methods attempt to tap the deeper meanings of particular human experiences and are intended to generate qualitative data: theoretically richer observations that are not easily reduced to numbers” (p. 437). Qualitative research pursues comprehensiveness in exchange for specificity in that it is an in-depth exploration of a few participants rather than a broad exploration of a large group. This kind of research is particularly appropriate if the purpose of the research is exploratory, in which the researcher is seeking a preliminary understanding of a problem or population.

There are four main categories of qualitative research methods in social work: naturalism (field research), grounded theory (inductive logical process), participatory action (empowerment), and case studies (descriptive). This thesis study used a multiple case study approach in which an in-depth examination through face-to-face interviews of a limited number of individuals allows for a thorough description of his/her perspective and situation. This is in contrast to group level studies that attempt to support theory through extensive data collection on a large and broad cross-section of a population, such as using

surveys or standardized instruments. This methodology has a long-standing and well-respected reputation in social work research.

There are many advantages to qualitative research. It yields a depth of understanding of attitudes and behaviors and insights into particular individuals and groups. It allows for flexibility in data collection, and it is cost effective. On the other hand, it is vulnerable to subjectivity, results cannot be generalized to a larger population, and findings cannot support causal inferences.

Qualitative design

The purpose of this study was to gain a deep understanding of the life and faith experiences of students who choose to convert to Catholicism while enrolled as undergraduate students at Texas State University. It was based on a thorough review of the scholarly literature. The researcher chose to refer to respondents as “participants” in this study in order to emphasize the interactive nature of the data collection. Two sources of data were used, including individual face-to-face interviews and a focus group.

Qualitative research methodology uses non-probability sampling procedures, which means that the selection of study participants is non-random. Random selection was not an option due to the lack of a sampling frame (a list of all possible participants from which a sample can be selected). Therefore, the sample is not representative and results cannot be generalized to the larger population which, in this case, would be students at universities who choose to convert to Catholicism. Non-random sampling is preferred, however, when potential participants are difficult to locate, the population is small, and the topic

is sensitive (Rubin & Babbie, 2011c). This study used the non-probability technique of convenience sampling, meaning that any students who were available and willing were recruited to be interviewed. In addition, two experts (called "key informants") were used: the priest and the deacon.

There are three general types of qualitative interviewing: informal conversation, general interview guide, and standardized interviews (Rubin & Babbie, 2011b). In this study, an interview guide approach was used in which the interviews were planned in advance and were more structured than informal conversations. A semi-structured and flexible format was employed, as described below. A general interview guide consisting of twenty questions was used in which the same questions in the same sequence were asked of each participant (see Appendix B). However, there was leeway for the researcher to probe certain responses and to pursue follow-up queries at the researcher's discretion. This maximized both the comparability of responses and the comprehensiveness of the data.

Description of settings

Two settings are directly relevant to this study: the university and the church. In addition, the geographic region of the university is indirectly relevant. The university is located in a large urban corridor in central Texas, approximately mid-way between Austin (the state capital) and San Antonio (one of the largest cities in the U.S.). According to the Archdiocese of San Antonio, the city has a Catholic population of almost three-quarter million people. The parish including Texas State, however, falls into the Diocese of Austin. According to its website,

the Austin diocese has a population of about one-half million people. Texas has an extremely large Hispanic population (almost 40%) which is the second largest in the country after California.

The university is nationally recognized and attracts students from throughout the state. According to the Texas State webpage, the university currently enrolls approximately 35,000 students in undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degree programs in nine colleges. The student body is diverse and, in 2010, the University achieved the distinction of being a Hispanic Serving Institute (HSI), which means that Hispanic-origin students comprise at least 25% of the undergraduate student body. It is not known what percentage of the student body is Catholic; however, it is assumed that a large percentage of the Hispanic students are "cultural Catholics."

The second setting is Our Lady of Wisdom (OLOW) Church. While not formally a part of the university; however, it is located immediately adjacent and closely affiliated with the campus and students. OLOW was originally established as the Newman Club in 1914 and was formerly also called the "Catholic Student Center."

Key informants

There were two experts (called "key informants") in the study from OLOW: the priest and the deacon. The goal was to learn about their perceptions and experiences in working with students who are going through RCIA as well as to benefit from their expertise on this process. Both informants participated in face-to-face interviews lasting approximately one hour. Data collection from the key

informants came from two forms of expertise. First, they possess expert knowledge of the Catholic Church and they lead the RCIA at Our Lady of Wisdom. Second, they possess knowledge of the students themselves. The IRB exemption status was maintained throughout the discussions with the key informants by discussing the RCIA participants as a group. The key informants for this study were Father Brian Eilers and Deacon Pat Venglar.

Student participants

This section will describe the specific methodology used for the student participant interviews. Participants were students currently enrolled (or very recently graduated) at Texas State University who choose to become Catholic while in college. In 2013, sixteen students enrolled and nine completed the RCIA. The sample for this study consisted on six students who are currently enrolled in RCIA (and completed in April 2013) or who completed in 2012. In all cases, the researcher knew the participant in advance and asked for his or her participation.

For the focus group, the research also used a convenience sample. It was originally planned that the focus group would include all five students who were interviewed. However, as it turned out, of the five interviews, only three agreed to participate. This was considered minimally acceptable, especially given the benefits of focus group data. Through this format, participants are able to listen to each other's responses and to exchange ideas, creating an interaction effect that goes beyond and builds upon individual interviews.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Data Analysis Process

Data was analyzed using qualitative methods. First, the individual interviews and focus group transcripts were read for initial themes. Six themes initially emerged: participants were predominately Baptist before conversion; their experiences with outreach; their sense of peace throughout the entire process; the Church teachings on the Eucharist and Mary; and their initial invitation to the Catholic faith. Then, the interviews were read a second time and additional sub-themes emerged, which elaborated on the previously identified themes. On the third reading, a six-stage process model emerged from the data, whereby the previous themes and sub-themes seemed to fit into stages along a continuum. On the fourth reading, the six-stage model was reduced to four stages since two stages seemed to fit logically with other stages. Thus, the final model that emerged was a four stage model, and many of the originally identified themes and sub-themes were subsumed within each stage. The final stage model is as follows: Stage One: Pre-Catholic Experience; Stage Two: Invitation; Stage Three: Commitment to RCIA; and, Stage Four: Post-Confirmation.

As presented in the methodology, the data consisted of four different sources: five individual student interviews, one student narrative, two individual key informant interviews, and one student focus group. All of the individual face-to-face interviews (n=7) with the students (n=5) and key informants (n=2) lasted approximately 60 minutes. The student interviews are randomly labeled (P1, P2,

P3, P4, & P5) along with the narrative story via social media (P6). This participant (P6) is included since the narrative was comparable to the other student participants. A focus group (FG) of approximately one hour was conducted with particular student interviewees (P2, P3 & P4). The key informants were the priest and the deacon of the university-affiliated Church, and their input is aggregated to protect their individual identities.

Demographic Data

The sample of participants consisted of four current Texas State students and two previous Texas State students. Four of the participants participated in RCIA at Our Lady of Wisdom (OLOW) and two participants, including the participant from social media, completed RCIA at another parish. There were four female participants and two male participants, their ages ranging from twenty to twenty seven years of age. Five of the participants were Caucasian and one self-reported as half Caucasian, half Philippine. Four were previously Baptist, one was previously Church of Christ, and one was previously unaffiliated with any religion.

Study Conversion Model

First Stage: The first stage as reported to the researcher is the Pre-Catholic stage, which examines the participant's lives before they encountered the Catholic Church. This stage includes two major sub-themes, which are: (1) previous religious experiences, and (2) previous assumptions about Catholics.

Sub-Theme One: P1, P2, P3, and P4 noted a Baptist background, P6 was previously Church of Christ, and P5 noted that they had no religious

affiliation growing up. P4 mentioned that his family switched from Baptist to a non-denominational “Mega Church.” P5 noted that involvement with a non-denominational Christian church before converting to Catholicism.

Sub-Theme Two: P4 and P5 mentioned that one preconceived notion they had about the Catholic Church was that it was a religion for Hispanics. These participants grew up in a town with a large Hispanic Catholic population, and they believed that because they were Caucasian, then they could never join. Until they experienced people of their own race as Catholics, it was never something they considered.

The majority of my town was white, so I grew up with some racist tones.

Catholicism was what Mexicans did, not us—that’s them, we’re us. FG/P4

I grew up in a large Hispanic population, very culturally Catholic, so I thought only Mexicans were Catholic, and it shocked me when I got here, and I found out about Irish Catholics and I found out I could be white and Catholic. P5

In regards to other preconceived notions the participants once held about the Catholic Church, P4 mentioned that he used to believe that Catholics didn’t know Jesus and were only interested in the rituals, along with other ideas such as Catholics charging for Mass, all priests being pedophiles, and Catholics worshipping saints. P5 said that while attending the non-denominational

Christian church, she was told that the Catholic Church had to get back to the Bible. P2 noted that she was told at her former church that Catholics weren't really Christian because they pray to other people.

Everything that I thought about the Church before becoming Catholic was actually wrong, and I've realized that it's beautiful and ancient, and it's lasted through the ages... but people aren't stopping to look. P4

They said the Catholic Church needed to get back to the Bible. I had just gone to daily Mass, and I saw SO much Bible in it! P5

They said Catholics weren't really Christian because they pray to other people. But that's not the case, it's asking for help. P2

The Catholic Church is liberal enough so super conservatives don't like it, and conservative enough so super liberals don't like it. We're our own thing, because it's the truth. FG/P4

The researcher specifically asked about current Catholic controversy in America. While that idea was discussed during the interviews, no one mentioned experiencing any negativity in the Church, particularly regarding pedophilia or any other scandal. When asked about the negativity portrayed about the Catholic Church, all said that their particular experiences have been positive, and

their questions about the controversies or the Church in general have been addressed or answered.

Second Stage: The second stage of the model is the invitation stage. All of the participants said that they received exposure to Catholicism through a specific invitation. Four sub-themes that emerged were: (1) an invitation to a Catholic event such as Mass or another activity; (2) liking their experiences with the Church; (3) having knowledgeable people around to talk about faith; and, (4) changing their assumptions about the Church.

Sub-Theme One: All of the participants were invited to either Mass or another Catholic activity by a friend or friends, or in the case of P3, a family member. P3 eventually converted with her "big sister" ("big") in her sorority. P1 and P4 were invited to Mass with friends, P3 was invited to Mass by both a family friend and a family member, and P6 was invited to a special Mass because he had won a Catholic scholarship. P2 was invited to the Our Lady of Wisdom retreat called "Bobcat Awakening (BA)," and P5 was invited to various Catholic activities and discussions by friends. All of the participants noted a special relationship they had with the people who invited them to these various Catholic activities.

An old roommate invited me to Mass, and I finally went, and that was when I first encountered the faith. There was no pressure, and it was always just an invite, never the pressure. P1

Growing up, when we went to church, it was with our babysitter... also, my cousin brought me to church and explained my questions I had. P3.

Sub-Theme Two: P1, P2, and P4 mentioned specifically how their initial contact with the Catholic Church was a pleasant one. P1 and P4 reported remembering the significance of their first Mass, and P2 noted that the retreat was the first step in "bringing me" closer to God.

BA was my first inkling of what Catholicism is, and got me closer to God, and now I'm actually doing stuff [with my faith]. P2

I was in Washington, D.C. It was 2007. I was with a Catholic family who traveled a lot, and they would always go to Mass on Sunday, because they could. It was in Latin... everything was so beautiful; there was a sense of ancientness that I'd never experienced before. P4

Sub-Theme Three: All of the interviewed participants said that they were able to talk to people who were not clergy about the Catholic faith. These people would answer their questions and were knowledgeable about the faith. P1, P2, P3, and P5 had peers their own age to talk to about the faith, and P4 had an older man (a friend's father) to talk to, a person the participant greatly respected.

He never pushed anything on me, and never judged me for what I thought... I'd get mad at him about Mary, and he'd be patient. I'd make fun of the Eucharist, and he'd understand it all, all my questions." P4

[A friend] helped walk me through my first Mass, and he gave me facts about the Church, and now I can really go to him with my questions. They've definitely played a big role in my process. P2

After I decided to enter RCIA, [a friend] and I had a good, solid friendship and she was all about the Lord, and I knew she'd have the same interests. P5

Sub-Theme Four: This sub-theme illustrates how the participants' changed their attitudes about the Catholic Church. This change of assumptions happened sometime during their initial experiences with the Church, which then reinforced returning. This sub-theme is necessary when going on to the next stage, which is the commitment to RCIA. The desire of the participant to learn more about the Church and to feel accepted within the community is what helped launch them onto this next stage.

I was at the computer at about 3 am, and things were falling into place, and I realized that I agreed with this stuff, it made sense... I knew Catholic people who were real and not weird, and I wanted to become Catholic! P5

I wanted a relationship with Christ again, and I didn't want to go alone... they showed me I don't have to be holy to be accepted. Y'all loved me when I thought no one else would. P1

They're not pushing Catholicism on me, and I like that. They're not asking me to convert, and they don't discriminate on my religion. They're all there to support me and pray for me, it's really cool. P2

Third Stage: The third major stage appeared to be their experiences when starting and committing to RCIA. All the participants made a decision to begin RCIA. Four sub-themes emerged: (1) The emotions behind the decision to learn more about the Church in a formal setting by entering into RCIA; (2) the willingness to understand difficult Church teachings; (3) the overall experience and knowledge gained; and (4) the reactions from family and friends about the decision to convert.

Sub-Theme One: The participants described their emotions in their decision to join RCIA. P1 and P4 mentioned feeling a sense of peace when they decided to join RCIA. P5 expressed joy and excitement in wanting to learn more about Catholicism, while P2 and P4 say they cried.

My emotions? I was joyful, crying a lot of happy tears... very peaceful.
P4

I cried because of what my Dad would say. I prayed that God would open his heart. P2

Sub- Theme Two: When it comes to Church teachings, the willingness to learn and accept these teachings is pivotal during the RCIA process. P1 and P5 said the Church teachings were “logical.” P2, P3, and P4 said they thought the teachings “made sense.” P5 particularly described more of an intellectual conversion before her actual conversion. P1 and P4 both noted skepticism of RCIA and went in with hesitations on teachings such as Purgatory and the role of Mary and the saints. P5 said that she was the person in class asking all the questions, because she was not afraid to ask.

“I went [into RCIA] thinking there was something I was going to hit and not agree with, and I knew I could leave, so that was good. It was awesome, though, because I agreed with everything! There wasn’t anything that didn’t make sense, and it was logical. I loved that! P1

I had more of an intellectual conversion before a personal conversion. P5

About halfway through the classes, I decided to do it [fully convert]. This was after we learned the bare metal stuff, after learning about the history and a new language. Like what a homily and the Eucharist are... Once I

saw the Church was using philosophy, no one uses philosophical constructs like the Church. P4

P1, P2, P4, and P5 mentioned that their understanding of saints and Mary were struggles, or that they had particular questions about those teachings.

Once it was explained about saints, it didn't make sense for people to have statues of other people, like Abraham Lincoln, but not have saints. I think you should pray to saints if you know their lives and they could have empathy for a situation and know how to pray to God for you in a certain way. P4

Why do they revere Mary so much? What's with the saints? P5

P1, P3, and P5 mentioned the universality of the Church being one of their favorite aspects of the Church. P3 even mentioned the universality of the Church as the one teaching that drew her interest. During the focus group, P4 mentioned the universality of the church as it applies to a person having a global community.

You could go anywhere in the world and it would all be the same. At that time, at any moment in time, you could go to a church. P3

It's all the same everywhere! It's a joy to travel and not have to worry about finding a church. P1

I wanted to find another church after college that believed the same things I did, and the Catholic Church is the same regardless where I go. That's always a good thing. P5

I went to Denver, and I realized I didn't know these people, but I thought, 'Hey, what are you stressing about? You're Catholic. No matter where you go, you're going home.' And it really hit me, then. Like there is a Catholic Church everywhere I go, someone I can trust. FG/P4

Some participants reported having difficulty grasping the Eucharist. P1, P2, P4, and P6 specifically mentioned the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist as being one of the most challenging teachings. This teaching is one that particularly separates the Catholic Church from most other Christian denominations.

I realized God can do whatever He wants, and if He wants this to be literally His body, well okay! I can't deny Him that. I had no idea it was even discussed like that in the Bible. It completely abolishes all my previous beliefs... I think it's cool because you get the most intimate part of Christ every day. It's beautiful, I can't wait. P2

I never really 'got it' until I got my first Communion. I was in a state of grace, and I really experienced the truth of it. P4

If you don't believe what the Catholic Church teaches, it's like you're worshipping a piece of bread. P1

P1, P3, and P5 mentioned their “love” for the Catholic understanding of confession in the interviews, but in the focus group, P4 also mentioned his own understanding of confession. P2 mentioned her initial hesitancy and final acceptance of this practice during the focus group.

I love confession... I don't understand why people don't like confession. I've carried this [sin] around for 22 years. My soul feels so much better after that [confession]. I'm like: 'You've done this since you were 7, you're fine.' P1

Confession is so awesome. I love it. It's like, a stress reliever. P3

I understand forgiveness now, because of confession. P5

At confession I'm like, 'Crap! I have to tell this guy all this stuff.' But then after, I have someone coaching me and pushing me to be a better person. That's what it's supposed to be. FG/P4

P4 and P5 mentioned the Catholic teaching of faith and works being important for them to understand. They noted that the Catholic Church's teaching is different from the Protestant belief of faith and works.

Faith and works was the first thing I could handle. Having one without the other doesn't make sense. The Catholic teaching on it made more sense. I realized the Church doesn't teach that you can work your way into heaven. P5

Faith without works is dead. You can't say you have faith if you don't do things. The gift of faith changes you, so you should do works because of faith. You give your life away now. P4

Sub-Theme Three: All of the participants cited a positive experience of RCIA and their growing level of knowledge of the faith as factors in their decision to complete the RCIA process. This sub-theme applies to all participants except P2, who has yet to complete the RCIA process.

I really enjoyed RCIA. It was another class on top of other classes, but it made all the difference that I chose to be there and wanted to be there... They've prepared me much better than like, 'whoop, you're baptized, so now you're Baptist!' There's too much of God to fully understand, but at least this helps me understand Him a little bit better. P1

I enjoyed [RCIA]. Sometimes it was dry and informative, but because I love learning, I soaked it up... it did an adequate job with theological catechesis (teaching of theology), but it's difficult to help a new Catholic fully live it out... but I sought that out myself. P5

I enjoyed where it was. Not a youth atmosphere. It was older people in their thirties and forties, and we're all doing it for different reasons. It was taught by a university professor; very intelligent... he could defend both faith and science. P4

Sub-Theme Four: The reactions from the participant's families and friends were included in this stage because many of the participants told their families of their conversion just before completing the RCIA process. These reactions varied by participant, but everyone except P4 stated that their Catholic friends were happy for their decision. P3 had the most positive reactions from family and non-Catholic friends. P1 had relatively less positivity; however, her mother's half of the family supported her. P5 had supportive reactions from her family,

even if her family did not understand why she would want to convert to Catholicism. P2 had neural reactions, happy reactions, and negative reactions from some friends, and has not told her family yet. P4 had the most negative reactions, with many of his family members saying he was going to Hell. This reaction is similar to the reactions from P6's family, as this participant mentioned his family believing that he is going to Hell as well. This sub-theme seemed to capture the most intense emotional reactions.

Pretty much all positive reactions... my family was supportive, and my mom was going back to church at the time, and while she's not Catholic, she was Methodist. My cousin was my sponsor. P3

A lot of people were like, 'why?' My Dad said, 'just remember it's not about the traditions, it's about Jesus Christ.' It's all about Jesus, duh, the Eucharist! But he said he's happy for me... Mom's side is Catholic, and they were overjoyed, and they sent me all kinds of Catholic gifts. My cousin is a nun. It was good. P1

People I know in [Our Lady of Wisdom], it was joy beyond joy! I didn't tell my family that I was becoming Catholic until after I became Catholic. My mom was like, 'that's interesting,' and my dad is anti-Catholic, so that didn't go over so well... the people who did know were supportive, and

glad I was finding my niche in the world, even if they didn't understand it.

P5

Already excitement from people here... I've had some neutral reactions, but for the most part excitement. P2

My grandma is a beautician, and she's very bitter still. Doesn't like it one bit. She's not even open to it. Says Catholics aren't even Christian and are going to Hell. Everyone who would go to church wasn't happy with me being Catholic, saying Catholics were ignorant and had no relationship with Jesus. Once I shared with my mother my happiness and the different teachings, that all of the things she had heard were wrong or skewed, she really started to like it. P4

When I got home, unfortunately I had to face my mother. She was deeply angered by my decision to change my religion. Being deeply faithful to the Church of Christ, she saw it as if I was making a decision that would send me to Hell by becoming Catholic. P6

Fourth Stage: This stage describes themes relating to participants' experiences after completing RCIA, now as Catholic converts. Five of the six students completed the process, as P2 is still looking to complete. Part of the RCIA process is that the participant decides to remain active until he or she

receives their Sacraments of Initiation. One of the key informants noted that this particular year, the class started with about sixteen participants and about half dropped before completion of the process. Regarding post-conversion experience, three sub-themes emerged: (1) how they feel now, and if there is any difference in their lives; (2) what they are doing now that they have received the sacraments; and, (3) their continued learning experience.

Sub-Theme One: Since converting, all participants interviewed noticed a positive change in their lives. They all mentioned the word “peace” specifically. P1 said that in addition to feeling peaceful since deciding to convert, she also felt joyous, that she could release some of the control in her life, that she doesn’t worry as much, that she is happier, and that her family has noticed. P3 mentioned a sense of joy as well, and a feeling of accomplishment since going through RCIA. She also feels that she can forgive people who have hurt her in the past. P4 said that he now knows his purpose in life, is more charitable with time and money, and values relationships more. P5 mentioned being happier now, more kind and patient, and more aware of human nature because of the Church’s teachings. Even though P2 has not completed RCIA, she has noticed a change in her life since learning about the Catholic faith. She finds the “good in everything” and feels that “God blesses the bad stuff, so it becomes good in the end.”

I take things in stride so much better... I don't worry as much anymore, my brain rests more. My family has noticed. They say I'm much happier now.

P1

I'm finding the good in everything. God still blesses the bad stuff and it becomes good in the end. P2

I'm less resentful to my mom and how she brought us up. I'm able to forgive my mom and move past it. Although it's hard, I've been able to find peace with that, going through it with Christ... Being a convert helps me appreciate some things a little more. We didn't grow up with it, so we had to learn certain things... the little things, like traditions. P3

I wasn't baptized until Easter Vigil. I felt different after. P4

I can't separate the fact that I am Catholic from who I am. I first and foremost identify as a Catholic. That is my identity. P5

Sub-Theme Two: This sub-theme focuses on what the participants are doing since receiving their sacraments. P1, P2, P4, and P5 said specifically that they are interested in reaching out to other people about the Catholic faith, even "cultural Catholics." P1 identified as "very pro-life," and would like to help women who are post-abortive to find healing. P3 said that she already talks to people

about the faith, and that she enjoys helping people know more about the faith.

P4 is considering a vocation to the priesthood and is currently actively discerning that vocation. P5 is currently a Catholic missionary and therefore has a full time job talking to people about the faith.

I am super pro-life. I want to help other girls; I love to talk to people who are pregnant... I'm better at reaching out to people who are not so perfect, and I can help them realize that they can be better. P1

I witness to my classmates, and some are fallen-away Catholic, and by being a disciple, I'm not afraid to spread His word or strike up a controversial conversation. ... My gay best friend and I talked about what's going on with the gay marriage thing... we had an honest conversation. He knows I love him as much as I love anyone. I don't discriminate. P3

When I was going through RCIA, I thought, 'Every Catholic should go through this.' I mean, I would go to the chapel and genuflect and ask someone why they kneel, and they wouldn't know. Like, 'Uh, cause everyone else is doing it?' FG/P4

I am considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, just a more committed lifestyle. I have a desire in my heart to give myself more completely in prayer, and it always leads to the priesthood—whether in the

diocese or a religious order. It's not all happy feelings, though. It's very much a sacrifice, a hard decision to be a priest. It's real, I mean, you want to do things men want to do, and while some may feel wussy, it's not...

The New Evangelization is growing, and we're in it to win. P4

I went to the School of the New Evangelization, lived in households, and knew I wanted to become a missionary with them. I want to do this with my life. P5

Sub-Theme Three: The third sub-theme that emerged was the continued learning process. All six of the participants were involved with other learning opportunities outside of RCIA, specifically through the missionary programs of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) and Saint Paul's Outreach (SPO). Whether it was formally in Bible studies and small groups, or simply affiliated with the organization, all six participants had some contact with either one of the organizations or the other. Some of the participants had contact with these groups before they converted, while they were going through RCIA; however, after completing RCIA, many of the participants became more involved with these programs. These groups seek to engage students more fully in the Catholic faith.

FOCUS being at [Our Lady of Wisdom] allowed for my conversion... I'm older, so there are less people I associate with, so FOCUS being there helped me find people who were closer to my age. P1

I was not aware of SPO being a unique identity from [Our Lady of Wisdom] until after I was Catholic, and they were promoting [an event] and I learned about St. Paul's Outreach. P5

According to the key informants, RCIA should be a stepping-stone to learning more about the faith, and while there is a group of former RCIA participants that stop being involved with the Church after receiving their sacraments, there are many who continue learning and growing as Catholics. Within the participants interviewed, P1 says she will hold onto her faith, because it was so hard to get, and that there's still so much she doesn't know. P2 is still involved with Bible studies, and P3, P4, and P5 say that during RCIA, the teachers specifically told them not to stop learning about the faith once RCIA was over. During the focus group, P2, P3, and P4 discussed the teachings they are still learning about.

I had to work so hard to become a Catholic; I am going to hold onto it tighter. I don't know of any other religion that makes you work so hard.

P1

We learned, but they encouraged us to grow on our own, because the Church has so much to offer. It's a lot of history, and how much of an impact the Catholic Church has had on it. Even to this day! P3

Purgatory was hard for me to grasp, and even after I converted, I didn't get it until Father Brian explained it differently... It gives me a lot of comfort that if I need to look anything up, it's there [in the Catechism of the Catholic Church]. FG/P3

I still don't get Mary, the infatuation with her. It still makes me ask 'What? Why is it like that?' It's just something I know I'm going to get, but not yet. By the time I die, I think I'll get it... I don't quite get the Mary thing, but I believe, and I'll process it later. That's what I've been doing with the Mary thing. Processing. Not there yet. FG/P4

Don't be afraid that you don't know everything once you get out of RCIA, I learned so much after. FG/P3

It's just the beginning of your journey. FG/P4

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experience of conversion to Catholicism as described by a select sample of Texas State students. Broad findings indicate that students engaged in a four stage process. Despite common themes, the participants progressed through these stages in an individual fashion with no two stories exactly the same. This is typical of many situational stage models (e.g., Kubler-Ross's well-known model on grief). These situational stage models referring to a specific short-term process are located within larger developmental models. For example, this thesis study identified a situational stage model for faith conversion that could be placed within a larger faith developmental model, such as proposed by Fowler.

There are many theoretical models of conversion discussed in the literature. None of these models, however, appear to address the specific steps of the actual conversion process, at least as experienced in the RCIA for Catholic converts. Therefore, this study contributes to the scholarly literature on conversion. As discussed earlier, there are very few studies on conversion among college students; and, of these, most are dated and refer to theology students. This study offers some initial descriptive data on a select sample of contemporary public university students.

The small student sample was selected by using a convenience sampling method. The six participants ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-seven. This cohort is consistent with the current scholarly literature in terms of the

"Millennials" and Fowler's faith developmental theory (i.e., young adulthood stage). That is, young adulthood is the time when individuals begin to make their own choices about faith. This study provides a description of how six students experienced this age-related situational and developmental process.

The key informants noted that many people who participate in the RCIA program are preparing for marriage through the Catholic Church. While it is not necessary for both potential spouses to be Catholic to get married in the Church, many people convert for convenience. None of the participants in this study were preparing for marriage. This makes sense, as the mission of Our Lady of Wisdom is to serve Texas State students, and the congregation consists of mostly unwed students who are not contemplating marriage.

The genders of the participants were four females and two males. This is significant because of the correlation to larger U.S. social patterns, in which women are more likely to be religious than men. As a consequence of the convenience sampling, all the participants were Caucasian (with one being half Philippine). The ethnic homogeneity is perhaps related to participant's previous religious backgrounds, which were predominately Southern Baptist. Texas State is located just south of the anecdotal "Bible Belt," which is a stretch of area in the southern United States that contains a predominately Protestant population. Some participants reported a religious segregation between their Caucasian Protestant families and the Hispanic Catholics while growing up. It is a relevant factor in their conversion that these participants did not know initially that Catholicism was a religious option until they attended college.

This finding is also potentially a factor in the reasons that certain reactions from family members seemed extremely harsh. Some family members of several participants expressed concern about their Catholic conversion (e.g., "going to Hell"). There is obviously much misinformation about the Catholic Church, even among other Christian denominations. Some of the participants reported accepting this misinformation based on their religious background prior to their individual involvement with the Catholic Church. An important part of the conversion process for these participants was to correct this misinformation and to clarify the Catholic doctrine themselves.

While there are clearly strong similarities across Christian denominations, there are also very distinct differences in doctrine between Catholic and Protestant beliefs. Particular teachings that were explored in this study are the Catholic teachings on the Eucharist, Mary, confession, faith and works, and the universality of the Church. Participants explored each of these topics, yet for the most part, these were also the teachings for which they had preconceived notions and misunderstandings. In both the individual interviews and the focus group, there was much talk about learning the beliefs of the Catholic Church, and how many of these teachings were misrepresented when conveyed by some non-Catholics (notably, family members).

This distinction regarding doctrine and how it is understood highlights the need for greater levels of religious understanding and the necessity of an open dialogue across religious faiths. This need is particularly relevant given the extreme religious diversity in the U.S. and around the world. According to the

key informants, the RCIA is set up as a mechanism for people to learn about the Catholic Church and to share that with other people. They mentioned that, while the Catholic Church understands that there is a discrepancy between the beliefs of the Church and many Protestant denominations, it is necessary to have an entire process to teaching non-Catholics the beliefs of the Church so they can make a well-informed choice on conversion.

One Catholic belief that sets the Church apart from other religions is the belief that the Eucharist is the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. This is in direct contrast to many Protestant religions, which teach that the act of Communion is a symbol of Christ's body and blood. When brought up by the participants, they mentioned how "transubstantiation" was the most challenging belief to accept.

Several participants still struggle with the Catholic teaching about the intercession of Mary and the saints and with releasing the remnants of previous misperceptions. Moreover, the participants note that they initially thought that Catholics worship Mary and the saints as they would Jesus. Although they corrected these misconceptions in the RCIA upon learning the actual Catholic doctrine, many of the participants reported continued struggles over "letting go" of some of their preconceived notions. As discussed in the focus group, a couple of the participants note that the teaching on Mary was a roadblock for them, and that even post-conversion, they still find it difficult to invest themselves fully into that teaching. Additionally, this fits with the situational model of conversion identified in this thesis, in which the last stage (post-conversion) is regarded as

one of ongoing exploration and growth. This model is further consistent with larger models of both faith and lifespan development, which view healthy growth as a life-long process.

Despite how difficult some of the teachings may have been for the participants, there were other teachings that, once explained, were easier to accept (such as confession and the universality of the Church). Even though these two teachings are still very different from Protestant beliefs, the participants found these easier to understand. In regards to the Catholic church's belief that people must go to a priest to receive absolution from their sins, participants reported this to be a particularly appealing practice (e.g., "feeling as though a weight was lifted off of my shoulders"). The key informants noted that, in general, confession is one teaching that participants of the RCIA have the most questions about, and once they understand it, they tend to appreciate that teaching. In terms of the universality of the Church, the participants all noted that they liked being a part of "something bigger." One important aspect of this teaching is the knowledge that, no matter where they go in the world, they will have access to the same Mass.

Although it may be difficult for the participants to understand all of the teachings of the Catholic Church, they noted that once explained, the teachings made sense and were logical, and that they felt they could trust the teachings of the Church. Two of the participants began the RCIA as self-described "skeptics," knowing that if there was a teaching that they disagreed with or could not accept, then they could easily quit. However, neither of them did, and they spoke about

how, once taught, they readily accepted the beliefs of the Church and wanted to complete their conversion.

One particular finding revealed a potential difference between converts and “cultural Catholic” adherents. As a part of the universality of the Church, the participants reported confidence that the beliefs of the Catholic Church were based on more than just one person’s interpretation, and that they had “withstood the test of time and place.” While they might not fully understand the teachings, they still accepted that they were valid. In the focus group, it was brought up that they learned in the RCIA that Catholic beliefs came from either the Bible or Sacred Tradition, but that many “cultural Catholics” (as defined in the literature review) had no idea why they believe certain things. The participants felt that knowing where the teachings came from and the reasons behind the beliefs added to their commitment to the conversion process. In addition, they agreed that all Catholics should be required to attend the RCIA to learn the basics of the religion.

One theme expressed across all stages of the situational model identified in this study pertains to a “sense of peace” experienced by the participants. This was noted at the onset, when they made the initial decision to convert and enter into the RCIA, during the process, and after their conversion. This is perhaps an effect of knowing that their decision to convert was perceived as positive and is anticipated to have a lasting effect on their spiritual growth. This awareness is consistent with the scholarly literature, in which religious affiliation is associated with enhanced well-being at both the individual and communal levels. It is also

consistent with conversion models that note a positive change in attitude and outlook for converts.

The situation stage model identified in this study also revealed the critical importance of a knowledgeable Catholic peer. This was particularly emphasized in the "invitation" which initiated their exploration of Catholicism. The importance of this peer relationship, however, extends well beyond the transition event of the invitation and proceeds throughout the RCIA process and into post-conversion. It appears that this invitation by a peer was absolutely crucial for all the participants, as that is how they were first exposed to the Catholic faith. This invitation led to the formation of relationships and participation in various Catholic activities which fostered discussion about the Catholic faith with their friends. In the post-conversion stage, the knowledgeable peer helped the participants to feel a part of the community of Catholics on campus (i.e., "it's easy to fall off the bandwagon if you don't have support"). They said that they would still be Catholic if they did not have this community around them because of their personal choice to convert, but that it would definitely be more difficult for them to be as faithful.

All but one participant specifically mentioned the desire to invite others to learn about the faith. This makes sense in that people tend to want to share what they enjoy and what they find meaningful with others. The key informants said that the ideal goal of the RCIA is to teach people the beliefs of the Catholic faith and to engage in outreach regarding the Church's teachings. They also mentioned that there is a group of people who stop going to Mass after receiving

their sacraments, and that if the RCIA always did what it was intended to do, people would not leave after completing the process.

The participants in this study who have completed the RCIA were not a part of this group of people who were no longer involved, as exemplified by their desire to reach out to others. This pattern is mitigated, however, by two factors: the participants are recently converted, and they volunteered to participate in a study on conversion (and more vocal in their support of the faith). The most outspoken participants were also involved in two outreach organizations and particularly motivated to share about their faith. In addition to outreach, two participants noted their interest in the differing teachings of faith and works between the Catholic faith and the Protestant faith. The two participants who emphasized this as an important difference are also currently engaged in mission work and one is considering a vocation to the priesthood. The Catholic teaching on faith and works says that one's faith leads to good works, which includes personal sacrifice.

In conclusion, the process of RCIA is one that teaches the participants what the Catholic Church believes, prepares them for a lifetime of learning more about the faith. The individual interviews with student participants and key informants as well as the focus group allowed for deep discussion about the reasons influencing their choice to become Catholic. A situational stage model emerged from the qualitative analysis of the multiple sources of narrative data.

The particular participants in this convenience sample noted an overall very positive conversion experience, and the desire for continued spiritual growth

within the Catholic tradition. The overarching finding is that conversion is a process that takes more than just the few months of official engagement with the RCIA. This situation model encompasses a timeframe including pre-conversion, the RCIA, and post-conversion. This gradual process is congruent with the more modern idea of conversion as discussed in the literature review. It is also consistent with the learning process that all Catholics are called to pursue by the Church. As so clearly stated by one participant in the focus group, “This is just the beginning.”

There are many limitations of this study that must be acknowledged, such as the small sample size, the lack of ethnic diversity (all participants self-identified as Caucasian), and the regional culture in which the university is located. Given the qualitative methodology, including the non-random sampling procedures, these findings cannot be generalized to another population (i.e., other university students who choose to convert Catholicism). In addition, as mentioned previously, this sample was comprised of students who may have a disproportionately high level of enthusiasm about the Catholic Church and the RCIA process.

The purpose of this descriptive exploratory study was not designed nor is it intended to explain why people convert. It is valuable, however, since it does contribute to the understanding of the Catholic conversion process for students attending a large, public, comprehensive university (as opposed to a theological school or Catholic college). The situational model proposed in this study can provide a useful area for further research, both to further elucidate the conversion

process for this age cohort as well as to expand to an examination of other groups based on age, prior faith tradition, etc. For example, given its small scale, this study could easily be duplicated or expanded at Texas State or at another university.

This thesis points to many directions for future study. It would be interesting to look more closely at gender and/or ethnic variations within the students who attend OLOW. In addition, this methodology could be used to examine why some students who attend OLOW choose to undergo the RCIA while others do not or why some fail to complete the process. One particular question in this regard is whether the decision to convert is more emotional (peer relationships and supportive community) or intellectual (Catholic doctrine and teachings). It would be interesting to conduct a follow-up study with these particular participants to ascertain their long-term commitment to their Catholic conversion.

As stated throughout the literature, religion is an intensely personal journey and ideally a life-long positive influence of development. This study has expanded the researcher's understanding of the conversion process and qualitative research methodology. Above all, as a cultural Catholic, it has satisfied the researcher's own deep curiosity on what factors influence students' decisions to convert to Catholicism.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

When I started this project, I had no idea what kind of responses I would get. I had this grand thought that people were going to say that the reason they became Catholic was because they had a supernatural experience with the Eucharist, and they suddenly understood, after years of searching, who God is. I thought they were going to be a lot like St. Paul on his famous ride to Damascus who was struck down from his horse by God and had an instant conversion. I am twenty-two years old and until this semester genuinely thought conversion worked that way.

Never had I considered that conversion is simpler than that.

It's the quiet, sincere invitation from a friend, a genuine act from someone who knows something great and wants to share that with others. It's the discussions about what Catholics believe—that, while at the time might be tedious and awkward, will plant a seed that could grow in the hearts of others. It's the encouragement from friends, and the community of support around people who want to know more about Jesus Christ through the Catholic Church. It's the courage that is necessary to tell a devoutly Protestant family that their loved one is going to be—God forbid—Catholic. It's the holding back of tears as their family tells them that they are going to Hell. It's the support of a friend who may not understand, but respects the decision.

It's going to classes after long days at school with the desire to learn more about the Church, in an effort to grow spiritually. It's being someone who is eager

to learn and teach the faith; it's the silence of an empty chapel, the majesty of a huge Cathedral.

It's the Easter Vigil Mass, where RCIA candidates are welcomed into the fullness of the Catholic Church, and they receive the Eucharist for the first time. And while it's no fall-from-your-horse conversion moment, it's the warm feeling of peace that overwhelms the candidate, and lasts forever.

It's the beginning of a journey that never really ends.

CHAPTER VII

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CHAPTER VIII

APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM TO BE A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Introduction

This research study is being conducted by Sarah Vielma, an Honors College student at Texas State, as part of my Honor's Thesis. The purpose of the study is to explore your perceptions and experiences as a convert to Catholicism, particularly at Texas State.

Procedures

You will be asked to volunteer for a one hour individual interview. Questions will include demographic questions so that I can describe the sample. Data will be reported in aggregate form only; individual characteristics will not be revealed. Therefore, identifiable information will not be linked to your interview responses. Other data collected will be open-ended questions pertaining to your experiences as a Catholic convert and what factors contribute to the identity and faith journey of this group, particularly at Texas State.

Risks/Discomforts

There are minimal risks for participation in this study. It is not anticipated that questions asked by the interviewer will cause any personal discomfort and you will be encouraged to disclose only within your own personal comfort level.

Benefits

It is hoped that your participation will help interested parties such as other researchers, people exploring faith options, other converts to Catholicism, and current Catholics interested about perceptions of converts. You will also have the opportunity to share about the difficulties involved in converting and being Catholic in general, so as to help understand this faith better.

Confidentiality

All information provided will remain confidential and will only be reported as group aggregate data only. The researcher will not keep a record of your name nor will your name be associated with your responses. There will be no written record of your participation in the study. After the research is completed by the end of April 2013, all notes will be destroyed.

Compensation

There are no compensations involved in this research.

Questions about the Research

If you have questions regarding this study, or would like to request a summary of the findings, you may contact me at (830) 569-9777, and at sv1096@txstate.edu. You may also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Catherine Hawkins, Professor of Social Work, at (512) 245-2592 or ch11@txstate.edu. Any questions about research or participants rights may be directed to Dr. Jon Lasser, Chair of the Institutional Review Board (512-245-3413 or lasser@txstate.edu) or Ms. Becky Northcutt, Compliance Specialist (512-245-2102 or sn10@txstate.edu).

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your standing with the University.

I have read and understood the above information. My voluntary participation in the study signifies consent. I may keep this form for my records.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

INTRODUCTION: As explained on the consent form, the purpose of this interview is to explore your perceptions and experiences as a convert to Catholicism, particularly at Texas State. Please answer within your own comfort level; you may refuse to answer any question or part of a question, and stop participating at any time. Since I am not keeping a record of your name, neither your participation in the study or your responses can be traced to you. All data will be reported in summary form only without any identifying information attached to your responses.

Demographics Information (to describe the sample):

AGE: ____ GENDER: ____

1. What do you consider your ethnicity to be?
2. What was your age when you converted?
3. What is your native language? What language do you speak at home?
4. What is your employment status? If employed, how many hours per week?
5. Have any of these variables influenced your faith journey?

Religious and/or family background:

1. Were you raised with any sort of religious upbringing? If so, what religion?
2. When was the first time you encountered the Catholic faith?

Personal experiences of beliefs

1. Was there anyone who led you to the faith? If so, could you describe the role they played?
2. Was there any one particular teaching of the Catholic faith that drew your interest? Ex: Mary, the Eucharist, social teachings, etc.
3. Where were you when you decided to convert? Was it at Texas State or somewhere else?
4. What happened to make you finally decide to convert/ could you describe the process and maybe some of the emotions involved?
5. I am really interested in why someone would convert to Catholicism while in college. There is a lot of research to show that people are leaving, could you explore some of the reactions you've gotten since deciding to convert? Maybe from family or friends?

Conversion Process

1. What is it that made you convert to a religion that is so often highlighted negatively in the news? What are the positives you've encountered since making your decision?
2. How was the RCIA process? Did you enjoy it? Was there anything you would change?
3. If you are currently completing the RCIA process, do you already consider yourself to be Catholic while here on campus?
4. Do you believe that the RCIA program here is preparing you for your new faith life?
5. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities on and/or off campus? Do you belong to any support group(s) or networks? How are these helpful?
6. Do you think Our Lady of Wisdom benefits from your being in RCIA? In what ways?
7. Do you think Our Lady of Wisdom offers you enough material for growth, being a convert?
8. Do you believe that the community at the CSC allowed for your conversion?

Conclusion

Are there any other thoughts that we have not discussed that you would like to share regarding your conversion process?