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## Article

# Changes and New Religious Orientations Among Practicing Catholics?

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**Abstract:** This essay takes its cue from a re-examination of a previous research report. In particular, this paper aims to present some additional reflections, which have also been shaped by discussions with recent research on lived religiosity. The 2017 study involved 2675 individuals of Catholic faith who completed a detailed questionnaire, representing an opportunistic sample, and another 372 people who formed the comparison group. The objective was to investigate the languages, forms, and structures of religious experience and religiosity. In this new interpretation, we instead focus on those elements of the 2017 study that suggest new shared attitudes or possible historical transformations of religiosity among the subjects initially consulted.

**Keywords:** lived religion; conceptions of religiosity; transformations of religiosity

## 1. A Significant Sample and a Second-Level Reflection

### 1.1. Some Premises

This study operates a second-level reflection on a previous research report and on part of the materials analyzed in it, published in 2017 (Moscato et al. 2017, henceforth referred to briefly as *Research 2017*). The revision is made in light of further reflections of the authors in the continuation of their studies, and in particular, when comparing research on lived religion, such as, for example, the American research conducted by N. T. Ammerman (2013).

*Research 2017* is substantially exploratory, and for several reasons, it constitutes a unicum in the framework of Italian scientific pedagogy. In fact, unlike the sociological and psychological fields, where there are well-established research interests on religious themes and specific active academic teachings, studies on religious themes have hardly appeared in Italian-language pedagogical production in recent decades. Moreover, there is almost no academic teaching dedicated to the pedagogy of religion.

It was not until 2014 that a working group was formed within the Italian Society of Pedagogy (SIPED) on the topic of religiosity and religious education, which opened a new season of research (cf. Triani 2015)<sup>1</sup>. *Research 2017*, carried out in the years 2013/14, therefore had no specific precedents from which to take its cue, and part of its originality is the request for scientific references on its first report and the attempt to initiate a multidisciplinary debate on the issues addressed even before the final publication of the data obtained. Its main merit lies in its attempt to produce a targeted survey instrument (a questionnaire), designed in Italian, and intended for adult subjects who were definitely religious and practicing. As a matter of fact, contemporary social research appears to be



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more interested in youth religiosity (Bichi and Bignardi 2015; Matteo 2010) and more focused on “widespread” religious phenomena, or in any case, on the Catholic population as a whole (Cipriani 1988). One result that we certainly acquired, regardless of the limitations of the instrument and the overall results of our research, is that a targeted questionnaire can be produced and can create a “narrative” structure of religious experience with reference to a specifically characterized sample, obtaining useful and comparable data<sup>2</sup>.

Our methodological approach tends to be phenomenological, oriented towards the orientation and understanding of religious experience in its concreteness and everydayness. We assume that the religious experience is in itself a dynamic element, both on the personal level and on the historical and anthropological ones; for pedagogy, however, it is not a matter of studying the permanence or disappearance of individual elements of the religious experience across generations, but rather of hypothesizing the overall characteristics of religious dynamism, first of all in the development and transformation of the individual person and, evidently, in the life of culture, considering that the socio-cultural horizon, from decade to decade, intervenes in turn in the formation processes of new generations.

We also assume that the way subjects represent and narrate their religiosity (the *lived experience* verbalized or expressed by mental images: cf. Campbell 2001) must be taken as a given in itself. We also believe that the dimension of the imaginary is as relevant as the formulation of ideas and concepts, inseparable from the languages used to express it. Consequently, any shared analysis of data, no matter how rationally controlled and justified, nevertheless constitutes an interpretation in its initial moment. And the reader must also be made aware of this. Within an assumed and shared interpretative responsibility, several revisions may therefore become physiologically necessary.

For *Research 2017*, as already mentioned, the choice of a questionnaire was functional to the comparability of the answers provided; such comparability is not normally allowed in in-depth interviews and similar tools, such as personal writings. Furthermore, the questionnaire somehow suggested a *narrative structure* to which respondents could “hook” their accounts of their personal religious experiences. In fact, the questionnaire ultimately reflected themes and sequences we had already encountered in previous biographical interviews (Gatti 2012) and in writings by university students, again on the theme of religious experience (Caputo and Pinelli 2014). The questionnaire was characterized by a relative breadth and internal articulation (31 items with at least eight different possibilities of choice, always including—as already mentioned—an open answer, “other”).

The sample was identified among groups of subjects definitely engaged in Catholic ecclesial contexts in terms of its functionality to the research objective (*purposive sampling*) and, to some extent, the “convenience” of it (*convenience/opportunistic sampling*), as it was accessible to us (Teddlie and Yu 2007). We have always met our participants in the course of adult education activities and in institutional contexts: there are parish catechists and educators, teachers of religion (IdR), students of theological faculties aspiring to pursue teaching, and teachers at Catholic schools. The administration, on paper, was almost always carried out by our own research team, and the questionnaire was always freely proposed to those present, always at the end of the training activity. Very few refused to fill it out, and the vast majority subsequently declared that they liked it (judging it as “beautiful” or “nice”), and often adding evaluations and suggestions for our research at the end. With this modality, we actually achieved a relative degree of active participation of the respondents, bringing us partially closer to the model of a study conducted *with* them rather than *on* them.

In 60 different administrations throughout the country, we met 2675 subjects (72% of them were women). Similarly, we operated with respect to a comparison group of 372 people, in ten further administrations, again carried out in other training/upgrading

contexts. In retrospect, this second group, largely including individuals who were little or not at all religious, as we had hypothesized, turned out to be too small compared to the sample (also, for accidental reasons, there was a reduction in the number of presences expected). The comparison group, however, maintained a similar cultural level with the sample (they were teachers and other professionals in training or university students).

Our sample is in fact composed of 48% graduates (that is, more than double the average number of graduates in the national population in the same years, according to the OECD 2013 Report), and most of them have also had specific academic-level religious education at higher institutes of religious sciences (ISSR) or theological faculties. Religion teachers make up a total of 27% of our sample, and ISSR students 7%. Together, the two sub-groups reach 34%, assuming the same quantitative consistency of the largest internal sub-group, made up of catechists, parish educators, and members of parish groups in general (who also make up 34%). The latter sub-group is the most heterogeneous with respect to age groups. Finally, teachers from Catholic schools (less than 20%) and members of ecclesial associations and movements, identified as such, are present in modest percentages in the sample. However, the answers highlight the presence of members of congregations, ecclesial movements, and associations of religious inspiration even within parish groups. Altogether, there are also 94 presbyters and about a 100 nuns in the entire sample, including many born abroad.

As already mentioned, the sample is predominantly composed of women (72%). The sex composition changes in favor of men only in a small sub-group of 40 vocational trainers from a Catholic school and in another internal sub-group of about 200 scout leaders (these are also the youngest individuals within the sample). The female prevalence of the sample as a whole reflects the already known higher presence of women in all educational and school environments. It also highlights a more widespread presence of women in parish activities. This is a widely known fact but not sufficiently meditated upon, at least on a pedagogical level. In fact, given also the reduction in priestly vocations (cf. Diotallevi 2014), today, the educational and didactic mediation of religious experience is mainly entrusted to women, who fulfill additional professional functions, compared to the traditional religious mediation provided in the family by female/motherly figures. This phenomenon cannot fail to have consequences on religious formation in the age of development (just as the greater female presence among teachers influences many phenomena, for example, male school failure), but precisely, the dynamic relating to the greater female presence in educational environments does not currently seem to be sufficiently examined and studied from a pedagogical point of view.

With regard to the age groups present in the sample, the presence of the two central age groups in the adult season is noted retrospectively: the 35–44 group constitutes 27.25% of the sample, and the 45/54 age group constitutes 28.75%. Together, they make up more than 56% of the sample, and thus clearly characterize it in terms of age (this also applies to the comparison group). Of course, in *Research 2017*, all analyses take into account the different age groups present, but it should be emphasized that the general trends highlighted, and which we return to here, are mainly the expressions of religious subjects belonging to early and middle adulthood (35–54).

We must also point out that our sample is characterized not only by the prevalence of women, but also by the strong presence of educators/teachers (60% of the subjects) and by a greater geographical location in the Center/North (63%) than in the Center/South (36%), to which we must also add a tendency to locate in urban centers and provincial capitals (almost 60%) compared to small towns and suburbs. In general, the distribution of administrations across the country is uneven because we precisely sought out our subjects wherever we could and surveyed them within training activities and cultural initiatives in which at least one member of the team was involved as a speaker. This element also

guaranteed us a tendentially favorable attitude towards the questionnaire in relation to the appreciation of the rapporteur who proposed it. In conclusion (as then verified in the analysis of the questionnaires themselves), we collected a sample that was certainly religiously practicing, often with specific responsibilities in the ecclesial fabric, with a good general education and with a secure Catholic formation. In any case, this sample is not representative of the Italian religious population as a whole. It rather expresses an educated and religiously active component of contemporary Italian Catholicism, which welcomed the administration with cordial curiosity, mainly evaluating the proposed questionnaire in positive terms. Consequently, it can be assumed that, precisely because of its internal composition, this sample reveals orientations and potential transformations of religious experience not observable in the average practicing Catholic population, and that it therefore provides us with a valuable observation point not otherwise obtainable from the analysis of representative samples.

On the other hand, we judge that research on religiosity and its formation still meets with strong resistance and little appreciation, if not open distrust, in the generality of the Catholic world. A representative sample would presumably not have welcomed us with the cordiality and willingness that we have encountered in our subjects. In short, this sample, due to its numerical consistency, its internal composition, the richness of the contents proposed by the questionnaire, and the very manner in which it was administered, provides an empirical material on religious experience which is still useful today and susceptible to possible new readings<sup>3</sup>.

### 1.2. Research Objectives and Results 2017

Our initial research objective was to identify, by means of the questionnaire, some transversal indicators of concrete religiosity<sup>4</sup>. The recognized images of God were supposed to bring out (or at least suggested) a personal experience of God lived by each subject; similarly, the images of the Church were supposed to allow us to identify the function attributed by the subject to the ecclesial structure as such. We then probed the degree and form of participation in ritual practices, prayer habits, familiarity with Sacred Scripture, and, finally, consent/disagreement both with certain essential dogmas of Catholicism and with some apparently shared practices in the Catholic world (Porcarelli 2017). We realized from the very first analyses of our data that, although in a definitely and avowedly religious context (not, therefore, in a secularized horizon), our subjects present some elements of dissent from the practices and/or some difficulties with the dogmatic apparatus, which differentiate them within the Catholic world, and we sought explanations for this in the prevailing typology of their religiosity. It must be said that our interest in adult religiosity was prompted by W. Fowler's study on the *Stages of Faith* (Fowler 1981, 2017<sup>5</sup>). We have thus read the elements of dissent and variation, with respect to the dogmatic apparatus and with respect to certain practices, as expressions of the autonomy of the adult stages of faith. In reality, individual transformations of religious experience cannot be separated from generational collective transformations linked to cultural factors, transformations that are often difficult to identify and study. From a pedagogical perspective, the problem of transformations of religiosity in the life cycle, in its interweaving with educational and training processes, still remains to be adequately explored (cf. Gabbiadini 2024; Pinelli 2024).

For example, it can be observed that there is in fact, in today's adult religious generations, a form of greater independence vis à vis ecclesial institutions, independence that perhaps determines a lesser importance of the doctrinal apparatus (or at any rate, a lesser investment of the believer in theology and dogmas, but also in religiously derived ethical norms), and our subjects' responses could be explained in these terms in light of Beck's

observation of the hypothesized modeling of the “Personal God”, which subjects would curate according to their personal religious experiences (Beck [2008] 2009).

In this review of *Research 2017*, we therefore wondered whether some of the traits specifically found among our subjects, although connected to their adult condition, were not also outcomes of a historical transformation of Italian Catholicism, linked to the present time, and also to the socio-cultural characteristics of our era. We recognize an ideal debt with the already cited study by Nancy Tatom Ammerman (2013)<sup>6</sup>, firstly because Ammerman chose to investigate the transformations of religiosity and its latencies, showing how the reading category of secularization, which assumes the progressive disappearance of religiosity from Western culture, is approximate at best. With these assumptions, Ammerman conducted a qualitative study on 95 subjects of different religions (or not at all religious) in Boston and Atlanta by means of in-depth interviews, diaries and personal recordings, photographs, and individual narrations of “everyday religiosity”, finding the transformations of everyday religion (where present) recounted in a myriad of short narratives. It must be said, however, that the 95 subjects studied by Ammerman are predominantly from Christian and Jewish backgrounds, apart from small numbers of non-theistic believers (for example neo-pagans), while Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims are completely absent from her sample. This may be a limitation with respect to the cross-cutting characteristics of universal religious experience (which Ammerman acknowledges), but the comparison with her sample is certainly useful for us. For example, her conclusions about the transformations of American religiosity, and also with respect to the widespread overlap between religion and spirituality, make clear an evident coexistence of strong elements of continuity—at least in relation to the Western religious tradition (for example, in membership and community ties, in the celebration of religious holidays, and in the conception of family relations)—but also significant novelties (for example, the dynamism in the composition and recomposition of parish-type communities, linked to individual migrations from one confession to another or from one church to another, and above all, forms of theological and ethical dissent serenely lived out, in ways that remain religious, without thereby breaking community ties). The last underlined element led us to reflect further on our responses to certain dogmas, towards which our subjects express a relative distance (Porcarelli 2017). Obviously, the review led us to a more comprehensive reflection on our entire research path which, in many respects, is still in progress. In the present text, we therefore focus on those elements of *Research 2017* that suggest new shared attitudes or possible historical transformations of religiosity in the subjects we surveyed at the time.

## 2. Religious Experience in the Images of Personal Experience

Of course, the representation of religion and religiosity, even in questions asking to express it with definitions or concepts, remains inseparable from the concrete and subjective religious experience of an individual subject and the mental images that emerge in their experience, but also vice versa: the imaginary often refers to ideas and concepts of a theological matrix that remain subliminal. Many of the answers given should be interpreted in both aspects and in integrated terms, which is not always easy, as we shall see as we proceed.

We observe that, to question 2 (“Do you consider yourself religious at this point in your life?”), 78% of the subjects answer in the affirmative, but in two different formulations: A (Yes. I am deeply religious; 36%) and F (Yes, I am serenely religious; 42%). Note that two answers could be provided, and so “deep religiosity” can coexist with some of the difficulties highlighted by the two minority answers we will look at shortly, but especially by the “other” answers. In any case, the prevailing image in subjective experience is a positive view of one’s religiousness and religiosity as a “serene” experience (42%). The

“deeply religious” option (36%) does not exclude difficulties of various kinds, but it seems to overcome them. On the contrary, the reference to “depth” can be read in a reinforcing sense. We then find fewer selections of the two options related to doubts about faith or the moral aspects of Christian doctrine (B: *Yes, I am religious though I have many doubts about faith* (10.31%); D: *Yes, although I have many doubts about the moral aspects of Christian doctrine* (9.60%)). In many cases, the subjects chose both of these less selected alternatives. There is therefore a minority of subjects (estimated between 10 and 15% of the total sample) for whom religiosity, while openly present, is lived in terms of uncertainty and problematicity, with doubt as a characteristic element.

For another aspect, the punctual analysis of the 111 “other” replies given to question 2 highlights elements of travail, self-doubt (uncertainty, walking a path, darkness, and difficulty in praying) and, above all, a distancing from doctrinal aspects and Church practices. The “other” answers illustrate elements that we will find later, but they already foreshadow that, for the majority of the sample, distancing and doubts coexist with a substantial depth of religious experience. This seems to us a first significant datum for this sample.

We find confirmation in the analysis of the replies to following question n. 3, which asked to mark the alternative that most expressed the present characteristics of one’s religiosity. In this case, the sample clearly favors (with 76%) option B: *I am a Christian walking on a journey* (with a slight prevalence of women). The second most selected option (with 17.60%) is D, *I consider myself basically a seeker of God* (in this case, men prevail, with six percentage points more than women). A residual 10% of options favor alternative A, *I have remained religious despite the fact that scandals in the life of the Church, both past and present, have deeply scarred me*. Let us assume that this 10% is the real percentage of subjects encountering actual religious difficulty (part of whom also selected the aforementioned option “I consider myself a seeker of God”). However limited this percentage may be, the perception of scandals as “wounds” in one’s religiosity somehow runs through all the answers given and emerges from many “other” replies. We believe that this specific perception is probably also a characteristic element of Catholic religious sensitivity at this historical moment, but it is not a decisive element, at least for the majority of the sample. The clear preference for the alternative “*a Christian on the road*” seems to highlight a basic serenity that accepts both the dynamism and the limits of one’s own religious experience and lives it with sufficient confidence and hope. Thus, we read in a key of persistent and convinced serenity the following answers, most of which express the imaginations of the subjects.

Question 4 contained a series of images, mainly taken from the Bible and in any case expressed with terms recurrent in religious language. The subjects were asked to identify the one(s) which were most expressive of personal religious experience:

- A. A bruised reed and a smoldering wick (7.17%);
- B. A river of living water gushing from within (19.81%);
- C. A little mustard seed (22.20%);
- D. A hope with eagle wings (20.26%);
- E. A fountain of light (7.25%);
- F. A sentinel longing for the dawn (23.77%);
- G. A grain of wheat buried in the earth (17.83%);
- H. Other.

As can be seen, many of these images are symbolically equivalent to each other and the choice may therefore have been influenced mainly by personal taste. However, some clear orientations stand out in the sample, juxtaposed with the comparison group, which distributes its choices more evenly, presumably revealing the traces of a religious culture

in the subjects' formation. The religious sample seems to identify at least five images as most significant in the individual experience: F, *the sentinel* (23.77%, with a difference of six percentage points in favor of men); C, *the mustard seed* (22.20%, with no appreciable differences between the sexes and age groups); D, *hope with eagle wings* (20.26%, with a difference of five percentage points in favor of women); and B, *a river of living water* (19.81%, again with a slight prevalence of women). The differences among the top five choices are in any case modest, as can be seen. At least three among the first four preferred images (*mustard seed*, *hope with eagle wings*, and *river of living water*), express a substantial positivity of religious experience and an expansive dynamism of it. The observable differences between the male and female sexes and among the various age groups are in any case too modest to be significant. On the other hand, the modest primacy of the figure of the *sentinel*, and the greater male liking for it, could depend on the catechesis of the most recent Popes, starting with John Paul II, or more banally on the all-male experience of military service, which would facilitate men's identification with this image. The image appears more ambivalent, however, than the three previous ones: the sentinel's waiting is exhausting and surrounded by darkness, and his charisma is waiting for the night to pass and the light of dawn to return. There is indeed something heroic and active in the figure of the sentinel, who keeps watch in a dark space-time and anticipates the better time to come, and this would explain why the vigilance of the sentry solicits the male imaginary. But perhaps beyond the suggestions of religious and/or poetic language, this image reveals an element that could characterize the religious sensitivity of the present era: there is a need for vigilance, there are threats and dangers, there are enemies lurking, and it is necessary not to lose control, not to fall asleep. In the imagination, this religiosity cannot be called entirely "serene".

The image of the grain of wheat (17.83%), ranked fifth, seems to be slightly less favored among the possible answers to this question, perhaps because the grain is "destined to die" in order to bear fruit. But above all, the image of the *bruised reed and the smoldering wick* seems to be rejected (only 7.17%)<sup>7</sup>. In fact, images of fragility and sacrifice are not rewarded compared to the more positive and happy imaginary figures, such as living water, hope, and the mustard seed. Moreover, these latter images show an expansive capacity, a "power" and a salvific efficacy that seems congenial to this sample, as we will see immediately when we move on to question 5.

Question 5 overlaps to a large extent with question 4, commented on above, in that it asks for "a mental image to associate with the experience of God". The sample accepts the challenge, while in the "other" answers, they explain that this association poses difficulties. In this case, option E, *an expanding vital force*, seems to be the preferred one, chosen by 35.73% of the respondents, especially women (in this case, there is a difference of 13 percentage points). We can also see that option E tends to be chosen more often with increasing age. We can assume that the preferred image does not refer to God as such, but rather to the individual experience of God, i.e., the individual religious experience (as we had explicitly asked in the question). The subjects who chose "life force" as an option seem to express a lived experience in which religious experience is an intimate resource that progressively expands even outside of the individual. In this way, the subjects seem to confirm what they had already expressed as their own lived experience in terms of a serene and positive religiosity. If, on the other hand, option E, like the following two, is to be taken as a reference to an image of God, it is inevitable to suspect a creeping pantheism, at least in the imaginary, if not in the conceptual.

On the other hand, the two following most popular options certainly refer to an image of God, also because of the biblical echoes contained in the images themselves. D, *An infinite morning glow*, was chosen by 24.26% of the subjects and was preferred by women

(with a difference of about seven percentage points). B, *Gentle breeze*, was chosen by 22.13% of the subjects (with a 7-percentage-point advantage for men). Other respondents chose G, *The top of a high mountain* (about 14%—tending to be chosen by men)<sup>8</sup> and F, *An intimate disquiet* (13.94%, with men slightly ahead by less than five percentage points). The answers C, *A devouring fire* (4.67%), and A, *A dark/bright abyss* (2.76%), were discarded, even though they are also biblical images.

We found it significant that the comparison group, which understandably tends to avoid this question on the *experience of God*, nevertheless chose the same options in the top three places, albeit with lower percentages compared to E, *vital force* (22.14%), to D, *morning glow* (20.10%), and to B, *gentle breeze* (14.50%). We must therefore assume an analogy/affinity of taste in the imaginations of the same generations regardless of a strong religious experience. Perhaps the supposed “creeping pantheism”<sup>9</sup> has become a shared element in the collective imagination for reasons originating in the cultural horizon. This could be an interference of contemporary ecological sensibility becoming an element of the imaginations of the latest adult generations, or at least passing through the imaginary rather than through a philosophical or theological conception.

The above reflections can be compared and complemented with the answers given by the sample to question 5.1. *Is there a figure or mental representation that you most frequently associate with the idea of God?*

The seven alternatives introduce theistic images, all of them scriptural in origin and all of them plausible within Christian horizon. Although we are still moving in the dimension of the imaginary, it seems clear that the subjects have identified their privileged image, trying to give a definite shape to their idea of God. In fact, option B, *the Good Shepherd of the flock*, is strongly favored with 33.42% (chosen more frequently by women by four percentage points), followed by C, *the Father who feeds sparrows and clothes the lilies of the fields*, with 21.64% (over 23% of women prefer this image compared to about 17% of men). This is followed by F, *The Creator of the infinite universe*, with 19.43% (slightly favored by men). It thus seems that in fact, God’s “tenderness” prevails over other divine attributes. Figures of divine tenderness reappear among the “other” replies in various formulations that are repeated, apart from only two options that reenact “a flow of energy”. “Tenderness” therefore prevails even before the most obvious and common of divine images anchored to an *idea* of God, that is, the *Creator of the universe* (this is one of the most widespread images of God across different cultures and religions). We note the significant gap between the preferences attributed to the Good Shepherd (33.42%) and all other options, which are much closer together. They are followed in the fourth place by E, *The risen Christ of Easter morning*, with 17.08%, and in the fifth position is D, *The Spirit blowing where He wills*, with 16.71%, and in sixth place is A, *Christ the Redeemer Crucified*, with 16.59%. These are roughly equivalent percentages. Discarded, finally, appears only option G, *The Christ who will come to judge the living and the dead*, which totals less than 4% of options (both in the sample and in the comparison group). In all of these last alternatives, the differences between men and women are always around 2% and therefore not significant.

We note that option D, *The Spirit blowing where He wills*, only has 16% of support, and it could have reinforced option E, *Expanding life force* (from question 5), which had 35% options, in the direction of creeping pantheism. We actually think that the favored images reproduce the triune God, and from a Christian perspective, it is not strange that the Creator Father (F, 19%) and the Holy Spirit (D, 16.71%) are less emphasized than Christ the Good Shepherd, or even the Father who feeds the sparrows and clothes the lilies, presented by Christ in the Gospel. It seems more significant that the *Christ who will come to judge the living and the dead* was discarded (because it seems to show the disappearance of the “fear of God” from the experiences of a sample that is in fact religious). For all of these

options, a comparison by age group does not provide any indication because the percentage differences are always modest and do not show, as in other cases, any trend.

We also note that, when asked about the *idea* of God, the comparison group—understandably—responds more and with less difficulty than about the *experience* of God.

### *Does Religiosity Transform?*

Leaving aside the imaginary dimensions, we would now like to dwell on another important element in the self-representation of one's religiosity, and that is the perception of its dynamism, introduced by question 11: *Do you think that your religiosity has been transformed, in a positive or negative sense, in the course of adulthood?* In this case, the perception of the transformation that has taken place is significant, and it is present in almost all of the sample (84.48% of the subjects, with a slight prevalence of women, but only by two points). Only 5.85% of the subjects believe that their religiosity has remained stable over time, and 2.87% declare that they "have never thought about it" (there is 7% who believe that they have not completed the path of adulthood, and this includes in part the 200 scouts who have lowered the average age of the sample). Questions 11.1 and 11.2 ask about the experiences that would transform religiosity in a positive (11.1) or negative (11.2) sense.

As far as experiences of positive transformation are concerned, we note two alternatives, each selected by 25% of the subjects, which presumably constitute two sides of the same coin, namely E, *Belonging to a parish group/community*, and G, *The catechesis/animation activities carried out and/or some experiences of volunteering and charity*. It is clear that E (belonging) is the precondition for G, but also C (*Belonging to a group/movement/ecclesial association*), which totals a further 20% of responses, constituting a precondition for G. In conclusion, there are at least 45% of subjects who report community participation as an element of positive transformation of their religious experience, but perhaps also as a condition for an adult religiosity<sup>10</sup>. In short, adult religiosity would be consolidated by experiences of service, of charity, and of voluntary work by forms of shared "commitment", which are, in turn, solicited by ecclesial affiliations. "Other" answers in this case specify memberships, encounters, and any pilgrimage experiences deemed significant, but also work experiences and stages of family life, such as marriage and the birth of children. Among the "other" replies, women are more likely to emphasize motherhood.

The data on membership that we have just highlighted were compared, in *Research 2017*, with the next two questions: 16 (Do you belong to any Christian-inspired cultural or professional association?) and 17 (Do you belong to an ecclesial movement?). We see that 32.26% of the subjects answer that they belong to a Christian-inspired association, and 19.40% say they have belonged to an association in the past. This means that 50% of the subjects have had at least one experience of Christian associationism. In this case, the male and female response percentages differ quite strongly because men declare a current associative militancy, totaling 43%, compared to 28% of women. As for joining a movement, slightly less than 20% of the sample declares belonging to one, again with a male majority (26.44% against 16.54 of women). On the other hand, again in question 17, 46% of the subjects declare that they only attend the parish (in this case, women prevail by about five percentage points). This sample therefore confirms that membership of church groups, associations, and movements is in any case an incisive element perceived in the individual's religious experience. The stronger male militancy, in a sample that is in any case predominantly female, presumably highlights the permanence, for adult women, at least in Mediterranean culture, of family and domestic commitments that reduce the spaces for concrete ecclesial participation. This datum is not in contradiction with the generally greater female presence in ecclesial environments: in our case, the prevalent age group is middle adulthood, which for women constitutes the season of maximum commitment, not

only to their work, but also to children who are not yet adults and to parents/in-laws who are already elderly.

*Academic studies and completion of a cultural education* are indicated as positive transformative experiences by 23% of the subjects (men predominate, accounting for almost 27% compared to around 22% of women). The element of significance is provided by the fact that the same option, relating to academic studies, in the same formulation also appears among the experiences that would lead to negative transformations. In this second case, it is chosen by only 6.72% of the subjects, with men prevailing by four percentage points. It should also be noted that, in the negative transformation of religiosity, the alternative most marked (but reaching only 5.60%) is F, *The commitments of real life...* with a very slight male prevalence, followed by G, *The bad example of men and women of the church* (4%). Actually, when analyzing the “other” answers, we observe that negative transformations are more often denied than acknowledged. Our subjects, who show a positive and expansive representation of their religious experience, consistently also consider the transformations of it throughout the seasons of adulthood to be positive. In any case, the elements of difficulty highlighted do not appear sufficient to damage or reduce religious experience.

### 3. Conceptions of Religiosity and Church Images

Let us now look at the answers given to some questions that aimed at obtaining representations of religiosity, the Church, and the dogmatic and normative heritage of Catholicism. Our attempt to obtain a representation of religiosity started from question 1, which opened our questionnaire.

The eight alternatives provided for question 1 are not mutually exclusive, and in many cases, the choices were combined (two answers could be given, and many gave more than two). We observe that the sample is clearly oriented towards option B (*Religiosity is an attitude of openness to the mystery of human life and reality, a journey, an expectation, a hope*). This alternative is favored by 64% of the subjects, with a slight prevalence of women over men. If the overall analysis of the entire questionnaire is taken into account, it can be seen that this alternative includes key terms (*journey, expectation, and hope*) that will return in many other choices in the sample. Immediately afterwards, alternative F (*Religiosity is a response to man's need for infinite meaning and fulfillment*) is marked by about 28% of the total number of subjects, again with a slight prevalence of women. In third place, we observe a different alternative, D (*Religiosity is a grace received, together with faith*), with by 20% of options. Here, the greater orientation of women for this alternative is evidenced by a sharper percentage choice (22% versus 15% of men). There is also a clear fourth place, highlighted by a 14% response for alternative E (*Religiosity is a strong conviction intertwined with affective elements, intuitions, experiences and other things that I cannot define with total clarity, and which also includes non-rational elements*). The three alternatives (A, C, and G) that attempt to propose a more objective and rigorous definition were in fact discarded, each chosen by only about 6% of the subjects. In all three cases, it is men who appear to be more inclined towards objective definitions. Overall, the sample thus shows that it responds—in our opinion—above all from its own religious experience, which, for 64% of the subjects, is best reflected in alternative B, although it could also be expressed by alternative E. Perhaps the lesser success of E is influenced by the presence of the term “non-rational elements”, and at the same time, by the absence of the keywords (*journey, expectation, and hope*) which seem to characterize the orientation of this sample. We judge, in conclusion, that the majority of subjects (64%) chose an option which expressed their own perception and did not try to give a “right” answer, showing themselves to be free of any complexes towards the researchers.

The situation is different for alternative D, marked by a significant 20% of the subjects (but in this case, women outnumber men by about seven percentage points). In this case, a kind of “hard core” seems to emerge that will resurface in other questions with similar percentages, referring decisively to the terms “faith” and “grace”, and which could express a more traditional religious position. As a matter of fact, the preference for option D seems to grow as age increases and peaks (37%) among individuals over 65 (a very narrow band in this sample).

Let us now look for feedback/confirmation regarding what was observed in the analysis of question 1 in a follow-up question placed towards the end of the questionnaire. Question 29 asks the following: *In your opinion, how does religiosity contribute positively to the development of human life and society?*

Let us see how the sample is oriented in its answers, observing that the alternatives rewarded are not in fact mutually exclusive, but the clear prevalence of alternative A (*It provides a meaning to life*), seems important to us. It is chosen by 56.26% of our subjects, without appreciable differences between the two sexes. The trend, however, is sharper with an increasing age (it reaches 60% in the 45/54 bracket). The other most selected alternatives present a consistent distance from the first and are instead closer to each other. Option B, *It determines universal human solidarity*, is marked by 20.71% of the subjects, with no difference between the male and female sexes. Option F, *It is the source of an inexhaustible joy of living*, reaches 16.85%, without differences between the male and female sexes, but it is chosen more often by younger age groups. Option E, *It makes universal brotherhood possible in the assumption of a single divine creator*, obtains 14.20% (with a slight prevalence of women). We see all of the remaining options discarded, with percentages close to 5%, as follows:

- C. It maintains hope in the fulfillment of justice;
- G. It puts curbs on human despair;
- H. It determines the criterion for distinguishing good from evil;
- I. It enables people to forgive each other.

We would like to point out that the N-A (not answer) for this question is also below 5%, and alternatives D (*It does not contribute significantly*) (0.41%), and J (*I don't know. I have never thought about it*) (1.12%) are also discarded.

It seems plausible that a sample that has already expressed serene and positive representations of their religious experiences could not admit that religion does not contribute significantly to the development of human life and society. But we found very significant, especially on a pedagogical level, the clear orientation towards option A, *It gives meaning to life*. This answer, often found in other empirical material such as writings of young people, identifies the psychological element that most radically and effectively makes religiosity a decisive existential resource (cf. [Caputo 2022](#)).

Let us now look at the answers to some questions which most highlight potential difficulties and disagreements among these subjects.

Question 25 expressly introduces the topic of dogmatic content: Is there any dogmatic teaching of the Christian Catholic faith that you still find hard to understand and/or accept? A total of 44% avoided the question by ticking alternative A, None in particular. The “other” replies point out that one can actually accept a dogma without necessarily understanding it. The answers indicating difficulties are fragmented, without showing a clear trend (G, The resurrection of the flesh (13.57); B, Original sin (12.59); H, Mary's virginity (11.88); C, The unity and trinity of God (11.62)). Among the other replies emerge, in additional terms (evil, hell, and the devil), the infallibility of the Pope. In short, no clear trend can be observed among the different options, and it seems to us above all that the sample implies in various ways a relative irrelevance of dogmatic issues in their personal experiences.

Partially different is question 26, *Is there anything you would prefer to change today among the norms of the Catholic Church?* As far as norms are concerned, we seem to observe a sharper tendency: *none in particular* is only chosen by 24%, while F, *The exclusion of divorcees from the sacraments*, is the option that ranks first with about 41% of approval (the objection among women is sharper with five percentage points more). It is followed by E, *The prohibition of any contraceptive practice*, with 22.57%, and again, women are the most decided with almost five percentage points. C, *The obligation of celibacy for priests*, is in third place with 20.44% without sex-based differences.

It seems to us that the sample moves cautiously with respect to dogmas, but also with less interest, and is freer with respect to norms, and more so with respect to practices, as addressed by question 27, *Is there anything you do not approve, today, among the practices of the Catholic Church?* In this case, the option *None in particular* goes down again (9.70%), while alternative D, *The presence of economic interests also in ecclesiastical circles and in the hierarchy*, prevails (48.71%), selected by 51.37% of women against 42% of men. This is followed by E, *The expression of political interests on the part of the ecclesiastical hierarchies* (20.71%), without sex-based differences; G, *Some inadequate training of future priests* (14.65%); and finally, C, *The persistent clericalism found within the ecclesiastical structure* (13.79%), denounced by men (21.78%) more strongly than by women (10.83%).

We observe that, as far as norms and practices are concerned, the sample shows a sensitivity decisively linked to contemporaneity, to problems socially perceived as current, and freely denounces them. By analyzing the answers in detail, also with respect to internal crossovers, it can be observed that the economic interests of the clergy and the hierarchy give our sample more scandal than political interests, but above all, that the *persistent clericalism* is less detected, although we can, on the other hand, observe that the sample anticipates (in 2013–14), albeit in minority terms, a complaint that Pope Francis himself has expressed forcefully and clearly in recent times (2024). Clericalism is not a historical novelty, but the awareness of it as an objective limitation in the life of the Church is current.

Among our last questions were two that we considered “revealing” at the time and which still seem very significant to us. Question 30 asks, *In your opinion, what “disfigures the face of the Church” today?*

- A. Nothing in particular (2.47%);
- B. The defense of privileges and the coverage of material interests (30.31%);
- C. The lack of charity and ecclesial unity (19.92%);
- D. Hypocrisy (25.23%);
- E. Illicit sexual conduct among priests (8.59%);
- F. The indifference of Catholics to the fate of the oppressed and persecuted around the world (11.88%);
- G. The pedophilia of some priests and the connivance of their bishops (32.22%);
- H. Ethically irresponsible customs widespread even among believers (16.93%).

The sample is quite clearly oriented towards four of the eight options proposed, namely G, *The pedophilia of some priests*. . . with 32.22% of choices and a stronger orientation of women (35.72% against 23.42 of men); B, *The defense of privileges*... with 30.31% of choices and with no difference between the male and female sexes; D, *Hypocrisy*, which outrages 25.23% of the subjects and has no consistent differences between the two sexes; and C, *The lack of charity and ecclesial unity*, which touches almost 20% and is expressed more strongly by men (26.44% compared to 17.52% of women). These answers bring us back to the theme of scandals in the life of the Church, and it can be observed that *privileges and material interests*, which wound 30% of respondents here (but when cited among the practices, in the previous question, hurt 40% of respondents), are presumably the most serious of the “wounds” in the life of the Church (along with the pedophilia of priests

and the connivance of their bishops). It is significant that what is indicated as a cause of religious difficulty (between 10 and 15%) in the questions defining personal religious experience is now configured with a percentage value between 30 and 45% in terms of criticism, that is, in terms of a “wound” consciously present in the lives of religious subjects, even if it does not condition their personal experiences.

Finally, the answer given to question 31, the last one of the questionnaire (which asks *What “shines on the face of the Church” even today?*), seems significant to us. The wording is deliberately bent on terms peculiar to the Christian religious outlook. The eight options, all plausible, include the following:

- A. Nothing in particular (1.86%);
- B. The renewed charity that translates into works (23.36%);
- C. An inextinguishable hope in the existence of good (27.10%);
- D. An ongoing reminder of the potential fullness of life (16.82%);
- E. The memory of divine revelation (8.03%);
- F. The continuous call to conversion of life (16%);
- G. Trust in divine mercy (42.65%);
- H. A treasure of spiritual wisdom (9.53%).

We observe, first of all, that the majority of subjects lean towards alternative G, scoring “trust in divine mercy” for over 42% (without significant differences between the two sexes, but with a percentage that tends to increase with age). The other two fairly selected answers (C, marked by 27% of the subjects, and B, chosen by 23%) are quite distant from G, although they reach appreciable values. D and F each reach a 16% response rate. But what surprised us at the time was the low percentage of responses achieved by E (8.03%) and H (9.52%), with reference to a religion that historically, in its two millennia of life, has been grounded on divine revelation and has set its educational processes on doctrinal correctness.

Option G, which so decisively emphasizes “trust in divine mercy”, actually presents a double aspect, because it not only attributes a specific salvific significance to the Church, but also reveals, in “mercy”, the face of the worshiped and awaited God, consistent with other specific responses on the image of God previously provided by the respondents. These response values (for G, C, and B) emphasize three key words, namely “mercy”, “hope”, and “charity”: they are certainly expressions of non-ideological religious experience, and one cannot fail to note that they put in brackets precisely the primacy of revealed truth, i.e., “faith”, at least in terms of adherence to specific and unchangeable doctrinal content.

#### *Some Tentative Conclusions*

In light of all the observations already described, we feel we can provisionally conclude that this sample of practicing Catholics has shown us a relative autonomy with respect to dogmas, an autonomy that perhaps conceals a relative disinterest in the doctrinal component of the Catholic religion, or at least in some dogmas, such as *the resurrection of the flesh*, which, according to some “other” replies, are judged as “unnecessary”. The fact that *the memory of divine revelation* is indicated as *shining on the face of the Church* by only 8% of subjects (even less than the almost 10% of subjects who attribute to the Church *a treasure of spiritual wisdom*) cannot fail to impress us because it signals an actual transformation of present Catholic religiosity.

A clearer autonomy seems to us to transpire from some decisive disagreements with certain norms (such as the exclusion of divorcees from the sacraments or perhaps Catholic sexual morality in general). These aspects seem to us to be linked to a different sensitivity of these adult generations, in relation to precise social transformations, both of customs and of ethics, among which the changed social position of women presumably stands out, and above all, the female self-awareness of the latest adult generations.

The criticism of certain ethically scandalous practices (economic interests, sexual abuse, and cover-ups of such conduct by the hierarchy) then appears strong and indignant. We reiterate that all of this “distancing” does not seem to affect the religious serenity of the respondents, so perhaps “distancing” constitutes a form of human maturity. In other words, it seems that the “conferring of meaning on the world”, which religious experience has guaranteed, maintains its potential as a personal “resource” even in the full awareness of the existence of consistent and lacerating “wounds” on the ecclesial body. There emerges a clear, albeit implicit, distinction between the ecclesiastical social and institutional body in its ethical limits, and that “mystical” and sacramental body which the Catholic Church continues to make exist in the expectation of believers. A vital hope in *God’s mercy* and an *inextinguishable hope in the existence of good* mark and identify around 40% of this religious sample and seem to guide it. Our re-reading would thus confirm N. T. Ammerman’s central thesis: religion has not disappeared from the life and culture of the Christian West. It has transformed or is in the process of transforming itself, and we must find other means of investigation to recognize and understand it, and perhaps new pedagogical and pastoral strategies to protect it and accompany its new developments.

While all the considerations made in this last part appear to us to be quite recognizable in contemporary society, from the point of view of research in a stricter and more rigorous sense, it is clear that our exposition is still on an exploratory level: each of the points identified (e.g., relative autonomy with respect to dogma; distancing oneself from unacceptable practices; the primacy of hope with respect to the fear of God; freedom of religious choice with respect to the constraint of vocation; and reservations on the exclusion of divorcees and the sexual morality of Catholics) would require specific verification with specific research tools.

In more general terms, while there is no doubt that certain transformations that have taken place are evident, there is no possibility of comparing the trends observed with the social and cultural situations of fifty or thirty years earlier because there is no earlier research that is comparable with this. Even an indirect comparison of trends, thinking of now classic studies from the early 20th century<sup>11</sup>, is not possible, precisely because the cultural climate and social conditions, over a century later, are no longer comparable.

These specific transformations of religious experience are the result of events and cultural dynamisms typical of the second half of the 20th century, which for Catholicism may also have tended to originate with the Second Vatican Council. Consideration should therefore be given to new and timely empirical research on individual elements of religiosity, possibly with further comparisons between observable attitudes and indications of the Catholic Magisterium, expressed in official documents. A comparison group should be found among practicing Catholics of peripheral parishes, with more modest or absent qualifications, with the caveat that a strong gulf has already been observed between certain documents of the Magisterium and the religious culture of the parish peripheries, which seems to offer a deaf resistance even to many stances of the current Pontiff (see the case of the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Within this new phase of interest and studies also lies the launch of the Franco Angeli Editorial Series, dedicated precisely to religious experience, in a multidisciplinary key, but with a specific pedagogical orientation. The Series today is in fact a laboratory for research and scientific dialog in the area of religious studies.
- <sup>2</sup> We do not intend by this to underestimate the value of in-depth interviews in this type of research, but there is no doubt that interviews present enormous difficulties in finding available subjects and substantial problems in the comparability of the data obtained (cf. Gatti 2012). We chose a questionnaire as the preferred instrument for comparability and for the possibility of administering it to large groups of subjects, believing that a sample, however non-representative, must also have its own significance in numerical terms. The same reasons for choosing the questionnaire as an instrument led us to limit open-ended questions and answers within it. In the 2017 research, however, the alternative “other”, which was always present and often used by respondents, provided additional data, which were also used in this review.
- <sup>3</sup> This text refers only to a part of our data. We will certainly also produce a revision of our data on knowledge of the Holy Scriptures (cf. Gabbiadini 2017) in light of other ongoing research, and presumably a review of our data on Marian devotion (Moscatto et al. 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> At least “transversal” elements, rather than “religious universals”, without underestimating the topic of religious universals in the international debate (cf. Filoramo 2014). G. Filoramo was one of the referees of *Research 2017*.
- <sup>5</sup> Fowler’s fascinating thesis on the “stages of faith”, linked to the phases of the life cycle identified by psychology, was widely cited in the 1980s, at least by some of the international literature, and it was perhaps overestimated, at least in terms of the empirical reference material. In the same years of research, we edited the Italian edition of Fowler (2017) for the Franco Angeli Series. Some limitations of Fowler’s hypothesis only became clear to us in the course of the Italian translation, which involved a more accurate study of his research.
- <sup>6</sup> The Italian edition of this volume is currently being printed in the aforementioned Franco Angeli Series.
- <sup>7</sup> Taken from the Deutero-Isaiah, this image contains a number of powerful implications, with respect to the sin and weakness of the creature in general, and with regard to the announcement of salvation about that “Servant” who will “lead the blind by unknown ways”. It seems strange that this sample, which in question 31 emphasizes 42% “trust in divine mercy”, as the *proprium* that “shines on the face of the Church”, should discard this passage. It can be assumed that they no longer know it and therefore do not recognize its theological content. Or the post-conciliar translations after the 1970s have made the image less incisive.
- <sup>8</sup> It is worth mentioning that the examination of the internal crossings showed that this image of the mountain peak is privileged by the subgroup of scout guides present among the younger subjects, a subgroup that was in fact predominantly male. Moreover, it is not surprising that the image of the summit, which requires discipline, sacrifice, and walking to be reached, positively encounters the sensitivity of subjects who live scouting.
- <sup>9</sup> The problem of pantheism was posed by Giovanni Filoramo in the *Research 2017* report.
- <sup>10</sup> This finding is in line with what Ammerman (2013) observed about membership forms in the American reality.
- <sup>11</sup> For example, James (1902) and Flournoy (2021), both of whom worked on writings and autobiographical narratives of subjects of a high cultural level, tending to be men.

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