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# The Journey Home: Lived Experiences of Emerging Adults Converting to Catholicism in a Philippine Highly Urbanized City

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**Abstract.** This qualitative descriptive phenomenology explores the lived experiences of five emerging adults in Bacolod City who converted to Catholicism from other Christian denominations. Utilizing Lichtman's "Three Cs" framework, the study identifies a transformative "Journey Home" structured around three overarching themes: pre-conversion struggles, motivations during transition, and post-conversion joys. Participants initially grappled with spiritual emptiness, personal doubts, and fears of social rejection. Their transition was driven by intellectual conviction, an attraction to Catholic devotions like the Rosary, and the supportive guidance of spiritual mentors. Ultimately, conversion culminated in profound joy, characterized by a deepened relationship with God and a commitment to active Church service. These findings offer a framework for developing tailored catechesis and evangelization programs that address the unique emotional and intellectual needs of young converts.

**Keywords.** Religion studies, Catholicism, Conversion, Emerging adults, Catholics, Phenomenology, Philippines

## 1.0. Introduction

The lived experiences of emerging adults transitioning to Catholicism from other Christian denominations are shaped by a complex interplay of personal and environmental factors. Identity development and overall well-being are significantly influenced by Christian affiliation (1, 2), while the transformative conversion process [3] also facilitates acculturation [4]. Individual motivations for religious practices, such as Mass attendance [5], are often nuanced by prior religious upbringings—for instance, a strictly Reformed context can deeply impact religious identity commitment [6].

In the ASEAN region, Catholic youth face distinct challenges; in Indonesia, for example, some emphasize Catholic orthopraxy while others prioritize interfaith dialogue [7]. Much like Filipino American youth, Christian migrants in Indonesia navigate cross-cultural issues and develop intercultural competencies during their faith transitions [8]. In the Philippines, this process is even more intricate, rooted in a history where Catholicism is deeply integrated into indigenous culture [9], though its modern interpretation remains diverse and evolving [10, 4].

Conversion experiences are further shaped by peers, family, and education, leading some to deepen their faith while others explore alternative paths [11]. This complexity is particularly evident in Bacolod City, where conversion is influenced by the Diocese's evolving role amidst a shifting religious landscape [12]. Contextual variables [13] and the tension between Western Christianity and Filipino spirituality [14] add further nuance to how religious beliefs and cultural identity intersect (Caneva, 2016).

Despite existing literature on identity development [15, 16], religious education challenges [17], and historical contexts [18, 19], a gap remains in understanding the Catholic Church's specific role in this process. Consequently, this qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of emerging adults (ages 18–25) in Bacolod City who converted to Catholicism from other denominations, focusing on the factors influencing their transition and the subsequent impact on their lives.

By investigating these motivations and challenges, the study provides insights essential for developing effective evangelization and catechesis tailored to young adults. The findings aim to help the Diocese and educators enhance training programs, improve school curricula, and foster more inclusive environments. Ultimately, this research serves as a foundation for understanding the dynamics of religious conversion in the Philippines and beyond, offering a roadmap to better support the spiritual journeys of young converts.

## **2.0. Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions serve as the bedrock of qualitative inquiry, shaping how researchers perceive reality, acquire knowledge, and address ethical considerations. These beliefs—spanning ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological dimensions—guide research design, data collection, and interpretation. By explicitly articulating these assumptions, researchers enhance transparency and rigor, allowing for a deeper, more critical evaluation of how human experiences and social phenomena are understood.

Ontologically, this study adopts *relativism*, which views reality as subjective and multifaceted [20]. The lived experiences of emerging adults converting to Catholicism from other Christian denominations are treated as unique realities shaped by individual contexts and interpretations. This assumption necessitates a research design that prioritizes diverse perspectives, acknowledging the inherent subjectivity within each participant's narrative.

The study's *epistemological stance* is constructivist, meaning knowledge is co-constructed through the interaction between the researcher and participants [20]. By focusing on the lived experiences of converts, the researcher practices reflexivity to manage personal biases and the subjective nature of interpretation. This commitment influences the methodology, favoring qualitative tools like interviews and open-ended questions to capture the subtle nuances of each religious journey.

Finally, the *axiological* and *methodological assumptions* emphasize the researcher's values and procedural choices. Axiologically, the study prioritizes empathy and respect, valuing participants' subjective truths to better understand their spiritual needs. Methodologically, this phenomenological study employs *Lichtman's 3 Cs framework* [20]. Through systematic coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing, the researcher seeks to unveil the essence of religious transformation while maintaining a supportive and inclusive environment for the participants.

## **3.0. Methods**

*Research design and conversation partners.* This study employs a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore the essence of the lived experiences of

emerging adults converting to Catholicism [21]. This approach focuses on describing the "what" of the phenomenon, prioritizing the participants' personal meanings, motivations, and perspectives while "bracketing" the researcher's preconceived biases. The "conversation partners"—emerging adults aged 18–25 who converted from other Christian denominations—serve as the primary source of insight. Through in-depth interviews, this framework seeks to uncover the nuances of their emotions and beliefs as they are articulated in their own words.

*Sampling and participant criteria.* Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected information-rich cases to ensure deep insights into the conversion process [22]. Participants were recruited from Bacolod City, Philippines, via social media and religious organizations. To qualify, partners had to be baptized in the Catholic Church for three to five years following their conversion from another Christian tradition. These criteria ensure that the participants possess sufficient reflective experience regarding the challenges, joys, and transformative aspects of their spiritual journeys.

*Research instrument and collection procedure.* Data were gathered through unstructured, in-depth interviews, a method that uses open-ended questions to allow for organic, emergent dialogue [21]. This flexible format captures multifaceted experiences and individual variations that rigid structures might overlook. Interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted either face-to-face or via technology-mediated platforms [23]. The researcher maintained a safe, empathetic space, obtaining informed consent [24] and utilizing probing questions and non-verbal cues to deepen the narrative [25]. All sessions were audio-recorded with permission to ensure verbatim accuracy for subsequent transcription [24].

*Data trustworthiness.* To ensure rigor, the study adheres to four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [26]. Credibility was established through member checking, where participants verified the accuracy of transcripts and preliminary findings [20]. Transferability is supported by "thick descriptions" of the Bacolod City context, while dependability is maintained via a detailed audit trail of all recordings, transcripts, and procedural decisions. Finally, confirmability was achieved through an external audit and a code-recode strategy to minimize researcher bias and ensure findings remain grounded strictly in the data [20].

*Data explication procedure.* The analysis followed Lichtman's [21] "Three Cs" model: coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing. In the coding phase, the researcher meticulously reviewed transcripts and non-verbal cues to identify salient phrases. These codes were then grouped into categories or meaningful clusters through an iterative process of refinement. In the final conceptualizing stage, the researcher identified key themes and sub-themes that represent the core essence of the conversion experience. This systematic movement from raw data to overarching concepts ensures that the final results authentically reflect the participants' transformative spiritual journeys.

*Ethical considerations.* This phenomenological inquiry prioritized the protection of participants' rights and the integrity of the research process through a rigorous ethical framework. By exploring the lived experiences of emerging adults converting to Catholicism in Bacolod City, the study offered significant social value, providing insights to inform pastoral and educational support. Respect for autonomy was maintained through informed consent provided in both *Hiligaynon* and English, while the inherent maturity of emerging adults allowed them to engage as non-vulnerable participants capable of honest self-reflection. Although the study posed minimal risks related to emotional discomfort, the potential for increased self-understanding and scholarly contribution justified the pursuit. Privacy was strictly maintained under the Data Privacy Act of 2012 using pseudonyms and secure

anonymization of all transcripts. Furthermore, the researcher ensured justice and transparency through purposive sampling, the declaration of potential conflicts, and the provision of travel reimbursements or meals as a gesture of equity. Finally, the adequacy of facilities—utilizing private, comfortable settings for interviews—guaranteed a safe environment for open dialogue.

## **4.0 Results and Discussion**

### **The Participants**

In Bacolod City, the conversion journeys of Nico, Lea, Lyn, Jane, and Art reflect a shared transition from various faiths—including Iglesia ni Cristo, Baptist, and Jehovah's Witnesses—toward Catholicism, driven by a common search for spiritual fulfillment over religious emptiness. For Nico (INC) and Art (Baptist), the move was spurred by a desire for sacramental life and the joy of leading their families into the Church, despite Nico facing social stigma as "*tiwalag*." Similarly, Lea and Lyn (Baptists) overcame personal doubts and fears of familial rejection by finding "home" through the Holy Eucharist and campus ministries like the Student Catholic Action of the Philippines (SCAP). Jane (Jehovah's Witnesses) was drawn by the communal bond of parish life and the beauty of the Mass. Today, these five individuals find profound meaning through active service as lectors, catechists, and choir members, exemplifying a commitment to Catholic doctrines, the intercession of the Saints, and a life of prayer that integrates their personal faith with community evangelization.

### **Thematic Insights**

The lived experiences of emerging adults converting from other Christian denominations to Catholicism reveal a multifaceted spiritual journey characterized by pre-conversion struggles, specific motivations during the transition, and the subsequent joy of finding a spiritual "home." Utilizing Lichtman's Three (3Cs) Data Analysis model to process verbatim interview transcripts from five conversation partners, the researcher developed composite descriptions to capture the essence of "what" was experienced and "how" the process unfolded. This rigorous synthesis of individual data led to the identification of three overarching themes and nine sub-themes that contextualize the fundamental nature of the conversion phenomenon.

### **Theme 1: Struggles Before Conversion**

The conversion to Catholicism among emerging adults from other Christian denominations is a multifaceted spiritual journey often precipitated by profound internal and social conflicts. This process is frequently initiated by a pervasive sense of emptiness that compels individuals to seek deeper meaning, while simultaneously requiring them to navigate a labyrinth of personal doubts and theological uncertainties. Beyond these internal struggles, converts must often manage the complex emotional and social repercussions of unsupportive or challenging reactions from family and peers. Ultimately, these interconnected sub-themes—searching for meaning, wrestling with doubt, and managing social friction—underscore the profound complexity of the conversion experience as it reshapes the individual's identity and relational world.

*Feelings of emptiness.* The experience of emptiness often serves as a transformative stage in spiritual growth, acting as a divine "pruning" process where God removes the superficial to prepare the individual for a deeper sense of purpose and a return "home." Within this study, conversation partners described their feelings of emptiness not as a permanent void, but as an active search for deeper meaning that ultimately led them to the realization that only

a connection with God could provide true fulfillment. This period of desolation functions as a necessary transition, shifting the individual's focus away from worldly lack and toward the spiritual abundance required for the next chapter of their faith journey.

It is like something is missing, that feeling of emptiness I am searching for. There are things I want to do, but I cannot because our family is very strict and has many restrictions. That is what you call curiosity. That is what Catholicism gave me—something to search for more. There is so much hope, ma'am, and the satisfaction that you should not just base things on practices, but on the teachings of the Church itself. (Nico, Personal Communication, February 11, 2025)

Growing up, ma'am, it felt like something was missing for me, so I converted to Catholicism. I did not feel it there; instead, I did not find what I sought in the Baptist church. It is like here (in Catholicism), I slowly started to fill that emptiness I felt. You have this emptiness you feel within yourself and are looking for something that can fulfill that emptiness. (Lea, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025)

Yes, ma'am, that is Sunday School. So, during those times, it was a very fulfilling experience for me, yet deep inside, I truly felt an unexplainable emptiness, a longing to be closer to God. (Lyn, Personal Communication, March 28, 2025)

In 2018, I was baptized before the pandemic. I am thrilled because I was able to be baptized. I am very grateful for God's grace in my life. It is so fulfilling that in all those years when I did not see Him, the emptiness I felt was truly filled. (Jane, Personal Communication, March 29, 2025)

*Personal doubts.* Deep reflection on personal doubt can propel individuals to explore diverse perspectives and pursue a more profound understanding of their faith. Rather than serving as a hindrance, these uncertainties often act as a catalyst for seeking ultimate Truth and experiencing divine grace. This transformative process mirrors the pre-conversion journeys of my conversation partners, who noted that their doubts were essential steps toward their eventual embrace of Catholicism.

I really struggled, Ma'am, with culture shock regarding the things I was learning because I was very open with my aunts during Catechism. You know, Aunt, in our INC (Iglesia ni Cristo). I was very hesitant to share what I knew. I was such an open person, Ma'am, truly open, and still curious. Back in our place, Aunt, we practiced things like these... but here, no? They fed me with correct knowledge and wisdom that satisfied my curiosity about my faith because, for me, this is all new, Ma'am. So, you mean to say that you experienced culture shock and felt overwhelmed by the truths you discovered in the Catholic faith and practices compared to your faith and practices in INC? Yes, Ma'am. (Nico, Personal Communication, February 11, 2025)

But as I was growing up, it was like there were question marks about the beliefs. What I believed was different from what we had in Baptist. It's like they don't really believe in Saints; it's like they don't acknowledge them. It's like they don't really believe in Saints; it's like they don't acknowledge them. Because in Catholic, right, we Catholics acknowledge them as instruments to pray to God. For me, I really believe in the Saints. So sometimes I really pray to the Saints; it's like they just help us get closer to God. (Lea, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025)

So that's it, as I grew older, my questions broadened my perspective towards faith and my interpretation of Christianity. That's when I started questioning why there are so many denominations, and why each religion claims to teach the 'Truth.' If Christ only established one church, why are we, the believers, the Christians, so divided? That question, however, didn't

push me towards Catholicism yet; they were just passing questions for me because my perspective on my faith was opening. But those questions began to plant seeds in my heart. (Lyn, Personal Communication, March 28, 2025)

That is also why I struggle, and it is one reason why I cannot feel or consider myself Catholic. Personally, I am bothered by things like that, right? Supposedly, if you are Catholic, you should have been baptized as one from the very beginning. Before I personally knew the Lord, I was full of hardships, both internally and externally. I always had doubts about myself, and even though there were people around me, I still constantly felt empty. (Art, Personal Communication, May 23, 2025)

*Negative family and friends' reactions.* The participants' transition to Catholicism elicited a spectrum of reactions from their social circles, ranging from perceived rejection by former denominations to anxiety regarding familial acceptance. While many faced fear and uncertainty, others received robust support for their decision to be baptized. Ultimately, these diverse experiences highlight the complex interplay between personal spiritual journeys and the surrounding social and communal dynamics.

And also, ma'am, every time we celebrate our Feasts, because I am really devoted to that service, sometimes when my former companions from INC (Iglesia ni Cristo) see me, they'll say, 'You will surely regret something, because you left.' That is what they say, ma'am. My answer is, 'No! I have not had any regrets; I truly do not have any regrets. (Nico, Personal Communication, February 11, 2025)

I also informed Mama and Papa, and then my siblings, and they all supported me. Wow! (Totally amazed with her family) Very good, because they are really supportive of your decision. How many siblings are you, by the way? There are 8 of us, ma'am, and I'm the 7th. (Laughing Boisterously) Wow! (Eyes widened) I was even nervous they wouldn't allow me. That's where I truly felt the Lord's love for me. Mama is Baptist, you see, so it felt kind of out of the blue to tell her I converted, since she's Baptist. But she didn't hesitate at all, ma'am, to support me. Her answer was: 'Whatever you want and whatever makes you happy.' So that's what happened, ma'am; she supported me. (Lea, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025)

It was not an easy journey; there were times when I had doubts, I was scared, I was afraid, and there was uncertainty in my life. I also worried about my family and friends, you know, how they would react. Yes, of course, because you were very active in the Baptist church, and now here you are, converting to Catholic. Would they see my conversion as a betrayal of our religion or of them as my friends? Would they misunderstand my reasons? Those struggles, that is where I felt those undeniable moments; those fears pulled me towards becoming a part of the Catholic church. (Lyn, Personal Communication, March 28, 2025)

So, we now attend church together, but she does not force me to become Catholic. She respects my decision. That is why when I decided for myself to be baptized into the Catholic Church... were really happy because, at last, my mind was enlightened, and I would be able to receive Jesus in communion. (Jane, Personal Communication, March 29, 2025)

Emerging adults often navigate a turbulent emotional landscape when considering Catholic baptism, frequently wrestling with internal voids and self-doubt that are exacerbated by the perceived social risks of their conversion [27, 28]. Because relational dynamics profoundly shape this developmental stage, the anticipation of family reactions serves as a pivotal factor; robust social support fosters readiness, whereas the fear of peer or familial rejection can intensify spiritual hesitation [29]. Ultimately, the transition into the faith is not merely a private theological shift but a complex interplay between an individual's evolving identity and their existing social network.

## **Theme 2: Motivations during Conversion**

Participants' motivations for converting to Catholicism centered on three primary sub-themes: intellectual conviction regarding Church teachings, an aesthetic and spiritual attraction to Catholic devotions and traditions, and the supportive guidance of spiritual leaders and faith companions. Together, these elements suggest that both personal study and communal mentorship play a crucial role in the religious conversion of Emerging Adults to Catholicism.

*Intellectual conviction and understanding.* Driven by a desire for truth, these individuals engaged in a rigorous study of Scripture, Church tradition, and historical evidence to find a faith that satisfies both the mind and heart. This process of intellectual conviction was fueled by reasoned arguments and theological insights that aligned with their core values, prompting them to question previous practices and ultimately "find the way home" to the Catholic Church. As they noted:

I realized that when I started my first Simbang Gabi in Catholicism, I felt like this is truly what Christmas is. Because in INC (Iglesia ni Cristo), we do not celebrate Christmas, as their teaching is that the Bible does not state a specific date when Christ was born. On December 16, 2017, my friend, who is a devoted Catholic, invited me to Simbang Gabi. That was truly the first time, ma'am. Wow! The Priest's Homily was so good. There, I realized your mindset should also be open to learning and expanding your horizons with ideas from the different perspectives of other religions. (Nico, Personal Communication, February 11, 2025)

And I also continued to seek the Truth... that is when I joined SCAP-UNOR (Student Catholic Action of the Philippines, UNO-R Chapter, a Student Religious Youth Organization). So, my joining SCAP really helped me become closer to God. Who told you to join SCAP? My friends, ma'am, during my college days. When I serve, it is like I have a communication with God. Because before, I knew there was a God, but it felt like there was no interaction." (Lea, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025)

If Christ only established one church, why are we, believers and Christians, so divided? That question, however, did not push me towards Catholicism yet; they were just passing questions for me because my perspective on my faith was opening. But those questions began to plant seeds in my heart. That is, it. It was during Catholic school, when I enrolled in UNO-R, that my perspective changed even more and became wholesome. (Lyn, Personal Communication, March 28, 2025)

I also join them for Sunday Mass, and I was truly struck by the priest's Homily because I really listened, ma'am. Because some, right, ma'am, get bored during the homily? They do not know or remember what Father preached about during the homily after they leave the Mass. For me, ma'am, I really listened to Father's Homily, and that is where I was truly struck in my heart: if you really listen to Father's Homily, you will gain so much Truth about faith and carry peace with you when you go home to your respective houses. (Jane, Personal Communication, March 29, 2025)

What motivated me, ma'am, were the Rosary and the Saints. And now, ma'am, they're encouraging me to observe and find out which Religious Organization I truly prefer, one that will further deepen my faith in God. But I have a friend named... who's recruiting me to join SCAP (Student Catholic Action of the Philippines, UNOR Chapter) so that my faith can be strengthened even more, along with the Truth of the Catholic Church. (Male 2, Personal Communication, May 23, 2025)

What is this Truth that you found? It is Jesus Christ... And I'm thankful that at last, I am Catholic because I've finally received Jesus in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. This is why I truly consider myself Catholic. Apart from that, ma'am, my faith in God will be nourished and

strengthened, and I will also see the Truth in the Church, ma'am. (Art, Personal Communication, May 23, 2025)

*Attraction to Catholic devotions and traditions.* Participants cited the richness of Catholic doctrine, sacramental life, and apostolic continuity as primary catalysts for their conversion. They were deeply drawn to the Church's liturgical beauty and communal worship, finding a profound resonance with its vision of human dignity, purpose, and salvation. Ultimately, the Church's moral guidance and historical consistency provided a foundational framework that informed their final decision to enter the faith.

And Catholicism gives me that, ma'am. Because of celebrating Christmas, I feel that kindness, love, and faith in Him are truly crucial and vital. (embracing self with a smile) So that means Simbang Gabi really attracted you to conversion? Yes, ma'am. First time in my life, ma'am, when I realized—that is what I told Mama—it is not all about religion. I felt the freedom to choose my own religion without any restrictions or many prohibitions. (Nico, Personal Communication, February 11, 2025)

It seems they don't really believe in Saints or acknowledge them. They don't seem to have much faith in Saints; it's like they don't acknowledge them. But in Catholicism, right, we Catholics acknowledge them as instruments to help us pray to God. For me, I truly believe in the Saints. So sometimes I really pray to the Saints; it's like they just help me get closer to God. So, which Saint do you particularly like that has helped you get closer to God? (Thinking) I just connected with St. Francis of Assisi. (Still thinking, laughing) Just him, ma'am! (Lea, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025)

That's when something truly began to change in my faith, my understanding, and the questions I had. During that time, I started attending Catholic Masses and the Eucharist on my own, not yet as a participant, but as an observer. As I observed the Eucharist I was attending, especially when the Priest consecrated the Host, questions arose within me that I simply couldn't ignore. Questions like, 'What if this is truly real?' (referring to the consecrated Host). 'What if Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist?' (I became teary-eyed, wiping them away). That question sparked and ignited something in me, an idea that pushed me towards my journey of conversion. I began to truly see the beauty of the consecrated Host, which Catholic devotees receive in everyday and every Sunday Masses. What attracted me most to Catholicism was that the more I explored it, the more I realized it offered a fulfillment for what felt missing in me. This included the sense of continuity in your Masses—your daily Masses truly never stop. This, along with your Tradition and Sacramental Connection to God, resonated deeply. When you asked about these traditions, I thought of events like venerating Mama Mary, praying the Holy Rosary, and our devotions towards Saints. And when you asked which Saint I liked most, I thought of the Saints from UNO-R: St. Ezekiel Moreno, Patron Saint of cancer patients, and St. Nicholas of Tolentine, Patron of poor souls in purgatory. I really like them, and my faith deepened significantly as I began to explore their life stories. (Lyn, Personal Communication, March 28, 2025)

I really like their friendship, ma'am, because they truly stick together. They were friends in SCAP (Student Catholic Action of the Philippines, UNOR-Chapter) and COM (Children of Mary) during their college years, both members of those religious organizations, and they remained so even after graduating and starting their careers. What's more, even now that they have their own families and children, I'm amazed that they still haven't stopped serving the Lord by being in the choir and being lectors. Sometimes they even do outreach for priests, the elderly, and children, like feeding programs. They help so many people. I hope that someday, I'll have a community like that too—where you're accepted and belong no matter

what, and they embrace you for who you are. Even when you're older, you're still friends and you accept each other. Their bonding is wonderful, and they are truly solid with one another. Through the choir and my aunt's lifelong friends, I saw what it meant to grow in faith alongside others in the community, guided by God. (Jane, Personal Communication, March 29, 2025)

When I was in Grade 4, I was part of the choir at... They knew I was baptized Baptist, but they still allowed me to join the choir. The only problem was that I could not truly consider myself Catholic if I had not been baptized in the Catholic Church, because that is what they always asked me—if I was Catholic... My aunts, from my stepfather's side, would go house-to-house, recruiting people for the choir or asking if anyone wanted to be a catechist or lead in praying the rosary, things like that... I was willing to join the Rosary group because, of course, I told myself, "This must be the time for me to convert to Catholicism." For me, ma'am, personally, it felt like I was searching for that; I really wanted to be Catholic. It is like what I was telling you before, how I could not truly consider myself Catholic yet, but I wanted to practice Catholicism so I could genuinely consider myself Catholic. (Art, Personal Communication, May 23, 2025)

*Spiritual leaders and faith companions.* Spiritual leaders and faith companions—including priests, catechists, and mentors—play a pivotal role in the conversion to Catholicism by embodying the faith and providing essential accompaniment. These figures foster a foundation of trust through consistent encouragement and guidance, directly nurturing the spiritual growth of those in discernment. By sharing their own journeys, these companions transform the conversion process into a supported, communal experience rather than an isolated pursuit. They stated that:

I approached the aunts who serve in the church and asked what other activities there were and how I could help. I reached out myself because I was happy to. So, my first memorable exposure was the choir... my neighbor invited me to attend Mass during your church's fiesta. I was so curious, ma'am, because I was from a different religion, and she was a very devout Catholic. I remember thinking, 'Wow!' She explained things so beautifully, saying that the feast was all about commemorating—remembering the people who gave their lives serving God, as role models. So, I had that courage and curiosity, ma'am. Their feast was in November, and then in December, that is when Simbang Gabi came, which I truly remember as the best turning point for me. (Nico, Personal Communication, February 11, 2025)

When I got to college here at UNOR, I discovered SCAP (Student Catholic Action of the Philippines), which greatly impacted my life. It felt like they were the very means through which, in every activity, I came to know the Lord. It was as if that was what brought me back, ma'am. You asked about those activities. We would have recollections of what we call evangelization. We were taught about the ways of the Lord, had faith learning sessions, and participated in Gospel sharing. We also had opportunities to evangelize others ourselves. (Lea, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025)

Yes, ma'am, that is where my ideas about Saints expanded even more. My ReEd (Religious Education) teachers who helped me with my faith were... who was my teacher for ReEd Christian Morality. I was surprised I almost forgot to mention... I personally studied it on my own. And yes, they gave me adult catechesis. Also, the ReEd Teachers at the University truly helped me further.) (Lyn-Baptist, Personal Communication, March 28, 2025)

I often join them for Sunday Mass, and I'm always deeply struck by the priest's homily. I truly listen, ma'am. You know how some people get bored during homilies and don't really know or remember what Father preached after they leave Mass? Well, for me, ma'am, I genuinely listen to Father's homily, and it always touches my heart. If you truly pay attention,

you gain so much truth about faith and carry a peace with you when you return home to your families. (Jane, Personal Communication, March 29, 2025)

My aunts, on my stepfather's side, would go around from house to house, recruiting people to sing in the choir or asking if anyone was interested in becoming a catechist or praying for the rosary... The person who helped me with my schooling, ma'am (I call her 'Lola' as she prefers), wanted us to pray the Rosary. That decision, and the Rosary itself, became the first sign that pushed me to convert to Catholicism. It truly felt like the sign that it was time for me to convert. Plus, my school here at UNOR is Catholic, so it felt really good that I enrolled here. (Art, Personal Communication, May 23, 2025)

Emerging adults are increasingly drawn to Catholicism by a quest for intellectual clarity and a framework for existential questions, finding resonance in the Church's rigorous doctrine and moral teachings [30, 31]. This conversion process often involves a sophisticated distinction between the Church as a divine institution of eternal truth and its flawed human elements (Francis, 2019). Their conviction is rooted in a "faith seeking understanding" that is bolstered by modern Magisterial documents [32] and a "personal adherence" to divine revelation [33: #88, #150]. Central to this spiritual framework is the "unified deposit of faith" found in Sacred Scripture and Tradition [33: #80-81], alongside the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Eucharist—the "source and summit" of Christian life [34]. Ultimately, this journey is sustained by relational support from spiritual leaders and faith companions, whose guidance in catechesis fosters a deep sense of belonging and theological maturity [35, 36].

### **Theme 3: Joys after Conversion**

The conversation partners described experiencing ineffable joy following their conversion, which manifested through three primary subthemes: developing a deeper relationship with God, possessing a pure joy that motivates them to lead others to Christ, and committing to a life of holiness by fulfilling God's will in their daily lives.

*Deeper relationship with God.* Cultivating a deeper relationship with God fosters a profound, abiding peace and fulfillment that transcends fleeting emotions (James 4:8). My conversation partners find this spiritual strength by actively pursuing God through prayer, scriptural study, and the Sacraments, while consistently reflecting His love and values within their Church and Community (John 15:11). These practices shift the focus from external circumstances to a centered life rooted in divine grace.

What makes me even happier, ma'am, is the practice of the Rosary. The Barangay sang Birhen (Our Lady of the Barangay) enters our home; it truly goes from house to house, right? Manang (elder sister/aunt) and I regularly pray the Rosary, and sometimes Mama (mother) even knows how to lead it, ma'am. (Nico, Personal Communication, February 11, 2025)

My life has undergone many changes, ma'am, which have truly helped me to know God more. This was largely through the activities in SCAP. You asked which SCAP activities helped me the most. These were the recollections, retreats, learning of faith sessions, and the 4:00 PM Masses. Every single step of it helped me. This is where I truly came to know God, and the more I got to know Him, the more I felt that I genuinely needed Him in my life. (Lea, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025)

You truly felt a deep happiness and the love of the Lord, ma'am, knowing that even your family supported you. It sounds like your life became much happier, with fewer worries, as you surrendered all your decisions to God... My work, ma'am, also helps me draw closer to God. When I graduated, ma'am, I always prayed for a job that was truly meant for me. This is my job, ma'am; I always pray to Him to give me a job that is truly for me. He gave me my first

job, and after only a few months, I was hired at... I always pray to Him that no matter where, I can just serve and help other people in the same way I serve Him (God). (Teary-eyed while sharing) It's like that. So, I was able to work and was assigned to Philhealth. It's like that, you get to encounter other people, and I get to help them in that way... If my relationship with the Lord had not been strong, I might not have emerged from the depths of what I was feeling then. My only work then, ma'am, was to pray and surrender everything to Him (God). For Him to guide me and my family. And that was it, just Him. (Crying and wiping tears with her hands). (Lea, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025)

That is why, ma'am, my decision to convert was a very emotional and transformative experience in my life. (Lyn, Personal Communication, March 28, 2026)

It was a spiritually fulfilling time, as I was finally able to build a deeper relationship with God. (Jane- Jehovah's Witnesses, Personal Communication, March 29, 2025)

And I cannot explain my feeling at that time when I received the Body and Blood of Jesus. It was so fulfilling, not just personally but spiritually, ma'am. I was just so happy, ma'am, and I cannot explain it beyond words." (Happiness shone in his eyes while sharing his experience.) It truly felt like a huge achievement, a moment where I could say, 'Yes, at last, I am truly Catholic. (Art, Personal Communication, May 23, 2025).

*Leading others to Christ.* Guiding others to Christ through evangelization, mentoring, and faith companionship fosters profound spiritual growth for both the mentor and the seeker. By witnessing through words and actions, these "conversation partners" provide essential support on individual spiritual journeys, strengthening the Church and the wider community. Ultimately, this commitment to sharing the faith yields immense joy as practitioners contribute to a flourishing communal life. They said that:

When the pandemic started in 2019, my Mama converted to Catholicism in 2022, and I was so incredibly happy... I now serve a lot in all the Masses—weddings, baptisms, funerals. I even laughed joyfully just thinking about it. I'm in the choir and a lector. You know, sometimes you feel such empathy for families mourning a loss, or you're genuinely happy for the married couple getting wed or for a newly baptized person being welcomed into the Catholic faith as a new member of the Church. And of all the celebrations, Christmas is truly my favorite. I've realized that I truly belong here in the Catholic Church. The holiness and the wholeness I've longed for is, in fact, freedom. Here, I experience true freedom to serve Christ wholeheartedly, without being dictated to or limited in what I can do and accomplish within the Church. And this holiness—this sacredness—allows you to grow and develop as a person, both spiritually and communally. After my conversion, I've completely devoted myself to Catholicism, and I truly want to bring my entire family into this same happiness I've found. (Nico, Personal Communication, February 11, 2025)

Ma'am, serving in Mass, being a lector, singing in the choir, and participating in Gospel Sharing—these have become integral parts of my life. Now, every decision I make involves consultation. Before making any decisions, I surrender everything to Him (referring to God). It is truly wonderful to live knowing that someone is guiding me... No matter where He (God) places me, ma'am, as long as I can still serve other people in that way, I will be happy. And so, I never expected Him to give me... ; it was such a good opportunity, where I truly felt guided... When I applied for a job at the..., we also had First Friday Mass there, and I got to serve. I told God that if the job were truly meant for me, He would give it to me. I simply surrendered everything to Him. Moreover, I am so happy because I never expected Him to give me the... job, ma'am. He truly guides me through my prayers. (Lea, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025)

Now, in my life as a practicing Catholic, my life has changed in so many ways I never imagined." (Her face radiates with happiness, light, and joy as she shares her experience.) I am actively involved in school, my community, my organizations, and my parish life. Yes, ma'am! I serve at Sacred Heart, where I am a lector and also part of the choir, as a member of the Lector Ministry... Before, I saw Christianity as a personal relationship with God, but now I see it as a communal and sacramental journey. ("My faith has truly deepened through prayer, the Sacraments, and serving others. I find immense joy in attending Mass, meditating on the scriptures, and embracing the rich tradition of the Church. Being in a Catholic school has also given me an opportunity to grow, not only intellectually but spiritually. "So now, ma'am, I have come to appreciate even more the beauty of Catholic teachings, faith and reason, tradition, scripture, and even free will. The biggest transformation in my faith has been understanding the grace of the Lord, the community, and the Sacraments. Before, I saw Christianity as solely a personal relationship with God. Now, I see it as a communal and sacramental journey. (Lyn, Personal Communication, March 28, 2025)

My faith journey has been enriched by many activities. I have attended Recollections, Retreats, Trainings, and Seminars, and participated in Catechesis. During the summer, I sometimes join the Flores de Mayo/Flores de Maria in adopted barangays here in Bacolod. I also help the Campus Ministry with Liturgy and Sacraments. However, my main focus and strength are in the Choir, as singing is my forte. Even with my busy work schedule at the Library, I make sure to serve there as a Choir member or lector for Mass. Consistently serving at the Oratory of St. Nicholas of Tolentine has brought me even closer to the Lord, especially through attending Mass and receiving the Eucharist...I felt a stronger sense of guidance in my life decisions and was proud to offer my service to the Church, especially during Mass. I also found joy in teaching children during Flores de Mayo, sharing what I had learned while preparing for baptism. Most of all, I was grateful to become part of a loving family—not just one connected by blood of Christ, but by Covenant and Faith. (Jane, Personal Communication, March 29, 2025)

What I'm truly looking forward to is being able to continue all my Catholic practices and serve God and the Church without any reservation...I actively encourage my siblings and family to attend Sunday Mass at our Parish. I also gently urge them to gradually get involved and serve in the church because it's truly for their own good (Art, Personal Communication, May 23, 2025)

*Living a life of holiness.* A life rooted in Catholic virtues like charity, humility, and forgiveness serves as a joyful calling rather than a burden, fundamentally shaping the conversation partners' daily decisions and religious identity. This pursuit facilitates an inner transformation that acts as an outward witness to the joy of following Christ, demonstrating that virtuous living actively enhances one's sense of fulfillment. As noted in their experiences:

But I pray that it is probably not wrong to eat that kind of food, ma'am, because if you believe in the Lord and you practice His 10 Commandments in your life to become a better person, to spread kindness, to spread love to society—that is you being the good that you have in your society. Catholicism continues to impact my life, my growth, and my development mindset until now. (Nico, Personal Communication, February 11, 2025)

You continue to serve and pray to Him (God) in your own little way. I have really changed, Ma'am. Before, my heart wasn't very understanding. Even though I got hurt, I kept going. But ever since I got to know Him (God), there has been a change, it's different now. Before, Ma'am, I was still young, very immature, snobbish, super-duper rude because I was quarrelsome and didn't care about other people. Even to the elders, Ma'am, I would really talk

back, I promise, but this is true. When I was young, in elementary or high school, I was really immature. Even with my aunts, I would talk back, Ma'am, and I was very talkative when I was little. In high school, I was always fighting, Ma'am. Especially after I converted, you wouldn't hear me quarrel anymore, Ma'am. (Lea, Personal Communication, March 3, 2025)

Now, in my life as a practicing Catholic, my life has changed in so many ways I never imagined. (Her face radiated with happiness, light, and joy as she shared her experience.) I am actively involved in school, my community, my organizations, and my parish life. So, you serve here at UNOR, and then you are also serving at your Parish on Saturday and Sunday? Yes, ma'am! I serve at Sacred Heart, where I am a lector and also part of the choir, as a member of the Lector Ministry. (Lyn, Personal Communication, March 28)

Right now, I'm not as actively serving in the church as before, ma'am, because I'm a Virtual Assistant these days. That's my online work, so I'm really very busy. But I never forget to go to Mass on Sundays and to thank God for all the graces He has given and that I have received from Him. That's why I just continue my prayer life, never forgetting to always pray for guidance and wisdom when I work online. And I'm always grateful for what's happening in my life right now, ma'am. This is all with the help of the people who care for and love me and my siblings. That's why, ma'am, we should also give back to the Lord all the thanks that are due to Him, because He is the source of everything, we have today. (Jane, Personal Communication, March 29, 2025)

How has your conversion to Catholicism impacted your life as a believer? Now that I know the Lord personally, my life is distinctly different. Even when faced with challenges, I experience an inner peace that is priceless. My life has gained a deeper purpose, rooted in my relationship with the Lord. I have found true joy, and there's a wonderful feeling in being able to share my experiences with others. (Art, Personal Communication, May 23, 2025)

For emerging adult converts, post-conversion joy stems from a deepened intimacy with God, sacramental nourishment, and a commitment to evangelization and virtuous living [37, 38, 39, 40]. To sustain this intellectual and spiritual conviction [41, 42], the Church should provide comprehensive doctrinal exposure [43, 44], sensitive yet objective teaching of unique Catholic tenets, and a revitalized liturgy through sacred music. Furthermore, spiritual growth is bolstered by Catholic-specific Bible study methods like *Lectio Divina* and the seven-step approach, alongside the active pastoral presence of priests as shepherds. By integrating these elements of formation, worship, and care, the Church can better nurture converts through the stages of initial struggle, intellectual motivation, and final transformative joy.

**Figure 2.**  
*The Journey Home: Conversion to Catholicism Among Emerging Adults from Other Christian Denominations*

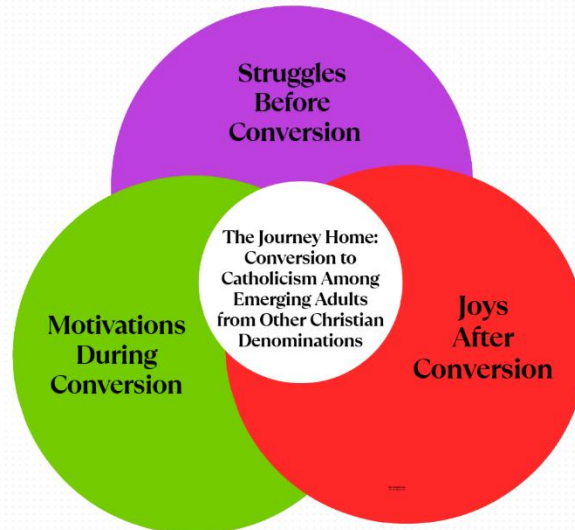


Figure 2 illustrates the multifaceted conversion process of emerging adults moving from other Christian denominations to the Catholic Church, organized into three interconnected, color-coded themes centered around the convert's journey. *Purple* signifies the "Struggles before Conversion," characterized by spiritual longing, internal doubts, and fears of social rejection. *Green* represents "Motivations during Conversion," where intellectual conviction, traditional devotions, and the guidance of spiritual leaders foster growth and hope. *Red* symbolizes the "Joys after Conversion," reflecting a deepened relationship with God, a commitment to service, and a joyful embrace of Catholic moral teachings. Ultimately, this diagram emphasizes that the journey "home" is a complex evolution shaped by personal reflection and communal support, highlighting a critical need for structured formation to equip young converts for active evangelization and mission within the Church.

### **5.0. Lessons Learned**

The conversion of emerging adults to Catholicism is a profound journey marked by initial struggles with spiritual emptiness, personal doubt, and the fear of social rejection. Driven by a quest for truth and intellectual conviction, these converts are often drawn to the Church through comprehensive catechetical formations and a fascination with Catholic doctrine. This intellectual pursuit is complemented by a deep attraction to traditional devotions—such as the Rosary and Marian piety—and the Sacraments, particularly the Holy Eucharist, which provide a sense of reverence and belonging. Central to this transition is the "influential role" of spiritual leaders, family, and faith companions who offer essential guidance and support. Ultimately, this "Journey Home" culminates in ineffable joy and a commitment to holiness, as converts find fulfillment in mission, ministry, and a deepened relationship with God within the Catholic community.

### **6.0. Limitations of the Findings**

With a small sample of only five emerging adults converting from other Christian denominations, this study's narrow scope limits the generalizability of its findings. While

providing helpful insights, the results may not capture the diverse upbringings and motivations characteristic of the broader population or represent the totality of the conversion experience.

### **7.0. Practical Value of the Paper**

This study illuminates the motivations and challenges faced by emerging adults converting to Catholicism from other Christian denominations, offering a framework for more effective, tailored catechesis. By integrating targeted faith formation, convert testimonies, and spiritual direction, religious educators can better nurture the unique faith journeys of these young adults. Furthermore, involving converts in parish outreach and youth ministry fosters a deeper sense of belonging, ultimately strengthening their long-term commitment to the Catholic faith.

### **8.0. Directions for Future Research**

This qualitative descriptive phenomenology could be strengthened by a mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative depth with quantitative breadth. By converting identified themes and sub-themes into Likert-type scales, researchers could measure the prevalence, frequency, and intensity of conversion experiences among emerging adults. This synthesis provides a more comprehensive understanding, combining contextual richness with statistical analysis and generalizability to better capture the nuances of the conversion process.

### **9.0. Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

No potential conflicts of interest relating to the research, writing, or publishing of this work were disclosed by the authors, according to their report.

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