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Original Article

Zoomers as Contemporary Adherents: Faith Expressions of Filipino Catholic Gen Zs

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Abstract

In the past decade, contentions and critiques about young people's religious life and faith formation have burgeoned in religious scholarship. The objective of this research is to explore the lived experiences of Filipino Gen Z as contemporary adherents of the Catholic religion, particularly how they express their faith. A total of 357 individuals participated in the quantitative survey, and four participants proceeded to the interview for the qualitative phase. By employing explanatory sequential mixed methods, three key findings were drawn from both quantitative and qualitative data: (1) faith expression remains performative; (2) faith expression is rooted in the family; and (3) faith expression is reflecting on life's meaning and doing good. This study concludes that young people remain faithful adherents, but they have diverse ways in expressing their faith, which are secular and/or supplemental to the doctrinal practices of the church. Further studies should explore how non-Catholic youth and those with low engagement in religious practices express their faith.

Keywords: Faith expression, Gen Z, Religious life, Spirituality, Young Filipinos

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Introduction

The Social Weather Station (SWS) registered a steady decline in religious attendance since the 1990s. Despite this statistical reality, more than 81% of the Philippine population still professes the faith, and the country ranked third in terms of the largest Catholic followers, next to Brazil and Mexico (Pew Research Center, 2011). In the National Filipino Catholic Youth Study (2014), 89.5% still consider religion as a very important institution in modern society. According to Cornelio (2020), the issue of non-attendance can be attributed to a generational shift as to “how young Filipinos are approaching their religious lives” (p. 95).

Similarly, at the turn of the century, more personalist and socially engaged adherents have been seen in contemporary religion (Ammerman, 1997). Likewise, young Filipino Catholics have the inclination to highly experiential and self-satisfying modes of religious approaches present in other Christian religions (Sapitula & Cornelio, 2014). They are even labeled as “messy followers” of Christianity or cafeteria Catholics (Cornelio, 2018; Cornelio, 2014), which connotes their subjectivities in the way they view and express their religious and spiritual lives that is often “shaped, differentiated, and animated by the social, political, economic, and historical contexts in which they live” (Castillo, 2020, p. 116). This clearly shows, which may be unpopular, that young people’s perceptions and expressions of their religious and spiritual lives cannot be easily dismissed as one and the same across generations (Cornelio, 2020; Cornelio, 2018; Sapitula & Cornelio, 2014), which therefore calls for multidimensional understanding of spirituality, especially in terms of faith expression and appreciation (Baring et al., 2018; Büssing et al., 2017).

This study aims to explore the expression of faith in Catholic Gen Zs in the Philippines. In this study, faith expression refers to the outward demonstration of beliefs and moral convictions. This builds upon Cornelio’s (2020) argument that there is a generational shift in the way individuals engage in and express their faith and spiritual lives, and that researchers “must not expect the same degree of coherence and subscription among adherents...[and] attention must be given to how [faith] is present—imagined, believed, enacted, narrated, and rehearsed—in the daily lives of individual” (Cornelio, 2020, p. 84). By studying how Catholic Gen Zs embody and express their faith, this study hopes to offer relevant insights into how living out their faith shapes their values, behaviors, and sense of identity. Understanding these expressions also helps churches, communities, and educators respond more effectively to their spiritual needs.

Methodology

Generation Z, or Gen Z, colloquially known as Zoomers, includes individuals born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). This research is particularly concerned with how this generation expresses their faith as followers of the Catholic religion in the Philippines, following explanatory sequential mixed methods (Creswell, 2014). Explanatory sequential mixed methods were appropriate for this study because they allowed the identification of patterns and levels of faith engagement among Gen Z Catholics through quantitative data and deepening the understanding of these patterns by exploring their lived experiences and symbolic expressions through qualitative interviews. This design ensured that the quantitative

results strategically informed the qualitative phase, leading to richer and more nuanced insights on faith expression.

A 17-item survey questionnaire entitled *Spiritual Practices* (Büssing, 2015) was used for the study's quantitative data. The instrument was originally designed by Arndt Büssing as a generic survey to measure a range of traditional and secular religious practices and engagement, and each item was scored on a four-point scale (Büssing, 2015). The instrument was comprised of 17 items subdivided into five factors, i.e., religious, humanistic, existential, gratitude/reverence, and spiritual. Each factor had Cronbach's alpha values: 0.72 for spiritual, 0.77 for existential and gratitude/reverence, 0.79 for humanistic, and 0.82 for religious (Büssing, 2015).

Photo-elicitation interview (PEI) was used as the main method for the qualitative data collection. Photographs were taken by the informants "to promote more direct involvement...in the research process" (Bignante, 2010, p. 20). As every religion relies on symbols, through photo elicitation, the objective was to evoke perceptions, expressions, and experiences of Gen Z of their spiritual and religious lives through "symbolic representations in the photographs" (Glaw et al., 2017, p. 2; Harper, 2002). Before the interview sessions, the informants were instructed that they had full discretion to take photographs that they thought were symbolic of their faith expressions. They were also given the discretion to label the photographs, which were then primarily used to initiate and guide the interview process.

The participants and respondents of this study were senior high school students from a Catholic university situated in the Central Luzon Region. The respondents were selected purposively, using homogenous sampling, with the following criteria: (1) senior high school Catholic students, both males and females; and (2) their parents/guardians were willing for their children/wards to participate. Since some of the participants were minors, informed consent was obtained from the parents/guardians, as the respondents are minors, but they also provided their assent.

Descriptive statistics was used for the quantitative data. The respondents were grouped based on their "engagement scores": greater than 50% means higher engagement, and less than 50% means rare engagement (Büssing, 2015). Based on the quantitative survey results, the qualitative phase focused on participants with higher engagement to capture a concentrated profile of active faith expression, where traditional and secular practices are most visible and meaningfully articulated. Including low-engagement respondents may shift the discussion toward disaffiliation or apathy rather than faith expressions, whereas highly engaged individuals can provide richer and more nuanced insights relevant to the objective of the study. The qualitative data were first presented individually in the results section. The data were treated inductively using Saldana's (2009) codes-to-assertions. Member checking and external validation were conducted for the results. This study guaranteed that no intended and unintended harm surfaced throughout the process and sought the approval of the Holy Angel University-Institutional Review Board (HAU-IRB). This study obtained the following IRB Clearance Protocol Code: 2021-065-MBRIVERA-ZOOMERSFAITH.

Results and Findings

This part shows the quantitative results and qualitative findings of this study. The results are divided into two parts: the quantitative dimension is presented first, followed by the qualitative dimension.

Quantitative Results

A total of 357 young individuals answered the survey questionnaire (Büssing, 2015). The data present the descriptive statistics and summary of engagements of the respondents in relation to their faith expressions based on religious, spiritual, existential, humanistic, and gratitude/reverence factors.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on the engagement of the respondents' faith expressions based on factors

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Religious	Rare engagement	116	32.5
	Higher engagement	241	67.5
	Total	357	100.0
Spiritual	Rare engagement	225	63
	Higher engagement	132	37
	Total	357	100.0
Existential	Rare engagement	33	9.2
	Higher engagement	324	90.8
	Total	357	100.0
Humanistic	Rare engagement	14	3.9
	Higher engagement	343	96.1
	Total	357	100.0
Gratitude/Reverence	Rare engagement	19	5.3
	Higher engagement	338	94.7
	Total	357	100.0

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics on the respondents' faith expressions' engagement based on factors. According to the results, 343 out of 357 Filipino Catholic Generation Z members (96.1%) are more engaged in being humanistic, the greatest percentage among the faith expressions. Furthermore, only 132 out of 357 respondents (37%) had a higher sense of spiritual engagement, which was the factor with the lowest percentage. Additionally, religious engagement was higher in 241 out of 357 respondents (67.5%), existential engagement was higher in 324 out of 357 (90.8%), and gratitude/reverence engagement was higher in 338 out of 357 (94.7%).

Table 2. Summary of engagement of the respondents' faith expressions

Level of Awareness on Sacramentals	Frequency	Percent (%)
Higher engagement in multiple faith expressions	348	97.48
Rare engagement in religious but has a higher engagement in other faith expressions	113	97.41
Rare engagement in all faith expressions	3	0.84

The results in the table above are used to determine the respondents' faith expressions' engagement. According to the data, 348 respondents out of 357 (97.48%) have a higher engagement in multiple faith expressions. Furthermore, 113 (97.41%) of the 116 respondents with rare religious engagement have higher engagement in other faith expressions. Meanwhile, only three people out of 357 (0.84%) show a rare engagement in all faith expressions.

Qualitative Findings

This section provides the qualitative data on faith expressions of four young individuals who agreed to proceed with the interview, as they scored higher engagement in multiple faith expressions. As mentioned above, those with higher engagement were selected for the qualitative phase, as their experiences and perspectives can provide richer and more nuanced insights that align closely with the objectives of the study. A pseudonym was used for each of the participants to ensure their anonymity.

Faith for Angelica, age 17

For Angelica, religion still has a great impact on modern society, but it should not define who we are and the way we express our faith. She shared that during holy mass attendance, she always looks forward to hearing the homily, which plays a huge role in her values and character formation. She also believes that it is high time that the Catholic church revisits its interpretation of the Bible, consistent with the demands of the contemporary period.

“I believe in the motto Signum Fidei meaning Sign of Faith.” Showing their altar at home, she said that this serves as an important representation of her family's faith. The crucifix at the center, she narrated, *“para na rin po siyang indirect way of saying Katoliko ako, I believe in Christ. I remember and take to my heart the sacrifices He make for me to live today.”* [It is like an indirect way of saying that I am a Catholic. I believe in Christ. I remember and take to my heart the sacrifices He made for me to live today.]

“Hindi siya basta-bastang pang-design lang po sa bahay,” referring to their Christmas tree at home. [This is not just a mere house décor.] She said that she is celebrating Christmas as a sign of respect and recognition of the history of the Catholic church. She personally feels that Christmas is a significant day for her as a Catholic because it is a reminder that a Savior was born, despite the various contentions on the exact date of birth of Jesus. She argued that no one should question one's way of expressing faith. She expressed that faith is not really a matter of seeing what has been said and disseminated through generations, but it is about having a complete trust and confidence that God exists: *“Gano'n po yung pag-express ng matinding paniniwala at pananalig sa Diyos.”* [That is the most potent expression of trust and faith in God.]

Showing a photo of her family, Angelica happily expressed: *“I love them and I care for them.”* It is a usual bonding of her family to regularly attend the Holy Mass, as it is their way of conveying gratitude to God for making them safe and healthy. She said, *“bonding with them means I appreciate the gift God gave me.”* Mass attendance for Angelica is one of the most significant expressions of faith, as it is an opportunity to listen, talk to God, and accept His words that guide her in life. Angelica considers her family a precious gift from God, and she believes the best way to give back is by loving and respecting them. She expressed that her family is one of the major considerations whenever she has an important decision to make, and that her most relevant achievements were obtained together with her family: *“Mas fulfilling lalo na*

po kapag ginagawa kasama ang pamilya.” [It is more fulfilling when I obtain something together with my family.] Through mass attendance, her family becomes closer and more understanding of one another. She believes that she will not be the person she is today if not for her family.

Faith for Gabriel, age 18

Presenting their altar at home, Gabriel shared: *“I think that the altar represents my faith po in a way na eto po ‘yung naging foundation po naming family especially ‘yung mga first few days po ng enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), when people were still uncertain about the (COVID-19) situation.”* [I think that the altar represents my faith in a way that it has become the family’s foundation, especially during the first few days of enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), when people were uncertain about the (COVID-19) situation.] He shared that during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire family would gather in the altar, light a candle, and pray the *Oratio Imperata* for protection against the lethal virus that had claimed so many lives. For Gabriel, faith is his root, and he can always rely upon it, particularly during unprecedented times. He believes everything will fall into its proper place as long as we hold onto our faith.

Faith provides direction and illuminates even in the darkest times of our lives. This really resonates with Gabriel, while showing a photograph of the tabernacle: *“I think that this (tabernacle’s light) represents my faith that when things go dark, that when the world shut down, the only light that we can find is our faith.”* In Catholic tradition, the tabernacle is the cornerstone of every church as it holds the *ciborium*, the Eucharist’s repository. Gabriel links his faith to the tabernacle’s light. He believes that faith allows him to find peace and security, especially during unprecedented times. While he confessed that he does not entirely follow all the rituals of the Catholic church, he shared that the pandemic has strengthened his faith in God. Faith for him is more than just the rituals; the trust in God matters.

It was during the peak of the pandemic when Gabriel started to question the existence of God. *“I was on the verge of agnosticism, that I didn’t see God anymore as a...Supreme Deity dahil po sa tagal ng mga pangayayari, na nagaganap at nangyayari dahil sa COVID-19, like there is no end po with this situation.”* [I was on the verge of agnosticism, that I didn’t see God anymore as a...Supreme Deity because of what was happening, the COVID-19 situation, like there is no end with this situation.] Displaying their Bible at home, he shared, reminded him that everything happens for a reason. Ultimately, for Gabriel, it is normal that we sometimes face questions about our faith, especially when we are uncertain of the world’s situation. He believes that challenges or problems make us better and stronger individuals, and that we can cope with all these hurdles as long as we have faith in God: *“We should always hold onto our faith...tomorrow will be better.”*

Gabriel described religion as his spiritual and moral guide. He is a Catholic, but he does not necessarily follow the entire tradition and rituals of the Catholic church. In his words, the church has become an “iron cage” that hardly escapes from its conservative genes. He argued that the church must revisit and rethink its positions that are actually antithetical to progressive society. On the other hand, he was impressed with how the Catholic church condemns and does not condone human rights violations and summary executions. Nevertheless, religion provides Gabriel relief, especially during trying times.

Faith for Judiel, age 16

Judiel is convinced that God really exists, as faith for her is about believing in the existence of a Supreme Being who is always there to guide people. While she believes that religion still impacts modern society, she also expressed that it sometimes puts barriers to other adherents. She specifically mentioned how the Catholic church discriminates against other members of society who do not conform to its teaching, *e.g.*, the LGBTQIA+ community. She argued that the church must be open in revisiting its teachings and reinterpreting the Bible.

Judiel described her faith as blooming flowers, a photograph she took for the interview: *“blooming for something beautiful, the one that shines the most.”* She maintained that as a young individual, she has yet to discover many things in relation to her faith, like a bud of a flower that is just starting to bloom. Judiel really appreciates God’s creations. She expressed that when she feels stressed and anxious, God’s creations remind her of the beauty of life. The nature’s beauty also reminds her to pray and be grateful for God’s blessings. She asserted that *“we need to take care of our environment as this is a gift from God to us.”* She expressed her disappointment with people who continue to destroy the environment, and others bear the brunt of such destruction through calamities; the consequences have become more unimaginable at present. Taking care of the environment is also her way of expressing her faith.

Judiel also shared a photo of her family and expressed that loving and appreciating her family is also her way of expressing her faith. While she admits that she seldom goes to church services, *e.g.*, Sunday mass, she believes that loving her family is one of the greatest expressions of faith. She shared, *“family tradition na po namin na at least every Sunday, kumakain po kami nang sabay-sabay”* [It has been our family tradition that at least every Sunday, we eat together as one family.] She asserted that such a family tradition is also their way of bonding and an opportunity for them to talk after a very long week. She added, *“I think that is already expression of faith since you’re giving time with your family.”*

Judiel mentioned that her mother taught her how to pray when she was a kid. As she grows, she believes that prayer must be coupled with doing what is right. She expressed during the interview, *“dapat ang dasal ay may kaakibat din ng paggawa nang mabuti”* [prayer must be coupled with good deeds.] She defines “doing right” as helping other people in need, respecting other people with different beliefs, and loving her family. Lastly, she considers her family to be her North Star, which guides her in every decision she makes in life.

Judiel also took a photo of a campfire as a symbol of how she expresses her faith: *“I am using the fire that God has given me to excel in life.”* She expressed that being faithful is more than just being religious. For her, faith frames who she is as it provides meaning and values in life. That is why faith expression also ensures she lives her life in the right way, *i.e.*, taking care of herself and excelling in every opportunity that comes her way.

Faith for Jaime, age 17

Jaime defines religion as an institution that binds people together to form a community. He also argues that religion still greatly influences our society, *e.g.*, government policy formulation, in which religion is still one of the major considerations. While he describes himself as not utterly religious, he believes having faith is more important than being religious, as faith provides meaning to life, especially amid overwhelming challenges.

When asked about the photos he took, he initially showed a photo of their altar at home, which he labeled as *“the center of our home.”* He expressed that having an altar at home is symbolic of Filipino Catholicism, wherein God is considered the family's center. More than being a center of the family, their altar holds them together—*“parang ang ganda lang isipin na nasa gitna siya talaga, like it is holding us together.”* [It is just interesting to think that it is at the center, like it is holding us together.] The altar is also a reminder for him to pray. He believes praying is still an important mechanism for expressing his faith. But he clarifies that praying does not have to be about memorizing long verses and stances of prayers, but praying for him is about directly talking to God. He upholds that praying is an opportunity for him to meditate, relax, and confide in someone whom he really trusts. When asked what he usually prays for, he answered: *“thank God for everything, to ask for forgiveness.”*

Jaime shared a photo of his family in a church and stated that it has been a family tradition for them to visit various churches within their vicinity whenever they do out-of-town excursions. *“It is a family bonding and a way for us to express our faith in God,”* he shared. He mentioned that he seldom attends Holy Mass, but when he attends, he makes sure that he is with his family. Growing in a Catholic household, Jaime expressed, *“my family plays an important part in my faith formation...na-explore ko ‘yung Catholic religion dahil sa pamilya ko.”* [I was able to explore the Catholic religion because of my family.]

Jaime continued by sharing another photo of his family. Faith expression for him is also about respecting his family, who taught him about faith and religion. He considers his family as his compass and anchor in his faith formation and expression. He maintained that he was so grateful to be surrounded by people who value love and respect, and such an environment for him promotes faith in God. He shared, *“masaya ako kasi God gifted me with such a wonderful family na minamahal at nirerespeto ako.”* [I am glad that God gifted me with such a wonderful family that loves and respects me.] With this blessing of the family, Jaime sustained that faith expression, which is about reciprocating the love and respect he gets from his family.

Jaime expounded that he sometimes questions his beliefs, but this does not lessen his faith. He maintained that probing one's belief is a form of catechism, by obtaining answers that draw him closer to God and better understand his faith. His advice for the future generation: *“never stop being inquisitive about your religion; it only further strengthens your faith.”*

Discussion

Based on the quantitative results and qualitative findings, three themes were mined from the analyses of data. These included: (1) faith expression remains performative; (2) faith expression is rooted in the family; and (3) faith expression is reflecting on life's meaning and doing good. These themes were further discussed vis-à-vis extant literature and studies on faith expressions.

1. Faith expression remains performative

It was clear in the survey results that participants had higher engagement in religious practices to express their faith. This particular finding in the quantitative dimension resonated with the results in the qualitative dimension of this study. Clearly, more than the majority of the participants are still active in religious practices as a way to express their faith. While it is true that faith expression changes (Büssing et al., 2017), adherence to religious practices of the Catholic church is still very apparent among young people. While young people are labeled as “messy followers” of established religious organizations (Cornelio, 2020), this study found that praying

is still very relevant among young adherents in expressing their faith. Such finding mirrors Cornelio's (2018) and Castillo's (2020) argument that young Filipinos have subjective ways of expressing their faith, which can be seen in how they understand and approach praying or contemplative practices.

It is noteworthy that faith for the participants of this study is not abstract, as they truly believe in the existence of God (Cornelio, 2020), but they also argued that it is incumbent upon the church to revisit some of its teachings. Clearly, these young adherents were not disgruntled with God, but with some of the pronouncements of the church, e.g., how the Catholic church stands with the LGBTQIA+ community. Hence, atheism in this generation cannot be simply defined as anti-God, but a resistance against long-standing ideology of the church that no longer resonates with the values and experiences of young adherents. The participants asserted that the Catholic church must also be mindful of the changing construct of faith (Baring, 2018), and in recognizing these changes, the church must be open in revisiting and redesigning its teachings to further encourage young individuals to participate in performing certain religious practices (Farah, 2019; Gomez & Gilles, 2014).

2. Faith expression is rooted in the family

Having a family-oriented culture in the Philippines clearly influences how young people express their faith (del Castillo, 2018). This study found that young people expressed their faith by exercising gratitude, having a feeling of wonder and awe, and learning to experience and value beauty. This speaks truth to Cornelio and Sapitula's (2014) assertion that young Filipinos were inclined toward highly experiential and self-satisfying modes of faith expressions. It is not extraneous to claim that the family greatly influences the formation of Filipino faith. In fact, catechism in the Philippines starts at home as children are taught about the basics of faith and religion at home, i.e., praying the rosary, reading the Bible, and learning how to be grateful for God's blessings.

The influence of family in faith expression was very apparent in this study. For instance, the participants showed their family pictures and described such bond as symbolic of love and respect. This clearly shows that the family is instrumental in the formation of young people's faith (Mansukhani & Resurreccion, 2009). This shows that family has a great role in the way young people approach and understand faith. This proves that faith expression is never limited to being familiar with and performing religious rituals, but it can also be found in how young Filipinos treat their family. This study echoed existing literature that faith expression may vary from generation to generation (Cornelio, 2020; Cornelio, 2018; Sapitula & Cornelio, 2014). It is clear among young Catholic adherents that faith expression is also about loving and respecting their families, dubbed as the greatest gift from God.

3. Faith expression is reflecting on life's meaning and doing good

This study clearly proves that the participants are active in helping other people, e.g., engaging in social and charitable services, and it is in these pro-social behaviors that they find life's meaning. True enough, social commitment is Gen Zs' fundamental opportunity to deepen and express their faith (Synod of Bishops, 2018). For instance, the participants maintained that their faith provided them meaning and security, especially during uncertain times. They affirmed that faith aids in interpreting their life experiences and navigating the complexities of life. Hence, faith expression also revolves around reflecting on and appreciating life's meaning by recognizing, interrogating, and valuing one's own experiences. This particular pronouncement from these young people during the interview sessions relates to

Aguilar's (2006) assertion that young people are actually looking for a religious community that provides a better and deeper understanding of life's meaning.

This study also nods with Ammerman's (1997) concept of Golden Rule Christianity: faith expression among Gen Zs remains to be about doing good. Young people emphasized that prayers must be coupled with good deeds, e.g., helping and respecting others and loving their family. Similarly, good deeds may also manifest by how they treat themselves. Apparently, self-care is viewed by young people as a relevant factor in faith expression, which ultimately benefits not only themselves but also their community as well.

Conclusions

The main objective of this study is to investigate how young people, particularly Gen Zs, express their faith. Following explanatory sequential mixed methods, three key conclusions were culled from both quantitative and qualitative data. First, the participants still recognize the important role of religion and religious practices in faith formation and expression. However, they underscored that the church must also be open in reinterpreting and redesigning these practices consistent with young people's values and experiences. Second, faith expression for the participants is about having an attitude of gratitude, i.e., recognizing one's blessings. Probing during the PEI, the participants emphasized that their love and respect for their families is also a way for them to express their faith. They all considered their family as the greatest gift from God, and loving and respecting them demonstrates appreciation of God's blessing. Lastly, young people of today express their faith by reflecting on life's meaning and doing good. They maintained that faith expression is navigating complexities by recognizing and valuing life's meaning. Golden Rule Christianity resonates with the participants as well. But they articulated that doing good must not only revolve around helping other people, it must also be manifested in the way they take care of themselves, i.e., self-care.

While young people are labeled as "messy followers" with the way they exercise their religious lives (Cornelio, 2018; Cornelio, 2014), this study proves that the way Gen Z Catholics define faith is not messy and abstract. This study concludes that young adherents remain faithful to God, but they have diverse ways of expressing their faith, which are secular and/or supplemental to doctrinal church practices.

Further investigation must be conducted in non-Catholic schools and among college students to elicit a more holistic understanding of Gen Zs' faith expression. Another limitation of the study was the participants in the qualitative dimension. Note that these participants scored higher in engagement in all factors in the quantitative survey questionnaire. Thus, further study on young people with rare engagement in faith and spiritual aspects may provide more nuanced results on how Gen Zs approach and express their faith.

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