

**The Constellation of  
the Ascension Alliance  
in the Independent Catholic  
Nighttime Sky**

A Presentation for  
the Ascension Alliance  
Convocation 2022

October 16, 2022

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## Preface

The present work contains the text that I drafted as part of the preparation for my presentation at the 2022 Annual Convocation of the Ascension Alliance, an Independent Catholic jurisdiction that I hold in high esteem. I presented this discourse on Sunday, October 16, 2022 through Zoom, only six days after a similar keynote at the 2022 Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion in Saint Louis, Missouri. Readers will immediately see the resemblance of the present text to that keynote, which is published in book form as *The Constellation of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion in the Independent Nighttime Sky*.

I heartily appreciate the warm response of all who gathered for this convocation of the Ascension Alliance. I compile this work as a gift to all our friends of the Ascension Alliance, to memorialize their gathering and to serve as a “snapshot” of the Ascension Alliance at the conclusion of 2022 upon which others might reflect in the future.

In a special way, I wish to thank Presiding Archbishop Roberto Foss and Chief Executive Officer Archbishop Alan Kemp for the invitation to share words as part of this convocation.

As is evident in this work, I greatly admire and respect the Ascension Alliance for reflecting to the larger Independent Catholic movement the mysticism and diversity of the early Church!

## Greeting

Good afternoon, Ascension Alliance! I am Father Jayme Mathias, pastor of Holy Family Catholic Church in Austin, Texas, and it’s great to be with y’all from “deep in the heart of Texas”! For my sake, I invite you to jot a quick note in the chatbox, so that I’ll know where each of you finds yourself on this green Earth!

## The Nighttime Sky

Though I currently live in Texas, I was actually raised in Ohio – so I’m fond of saying that “I come from the corn fields of Ohio, to the corn tortillas of Texas.” I also joke that Ohio is a great state to be *from* – but one of the things that I miss most about “the corn fields of Ohio” is the nighttime sky, which, free from the light pollution of so

many cities, is filled with all sorts of stars. Astronomers tell us that the human eye can see some 5,000 to 10,000 stars in the nighttime sky – so we have far eclipsed the promise made to Sara and Abraham, our ancestors in the faith.<sup>1</sup>

From the time that I was a boy and then a Boy Scout, and then later studied astronomy at the university, I have been fascinated with those “great balls of fire”<sup>2</sup> in the nighttime sky, which illuminate the planets that revolve around them. You’ve no doubt noticed: Some stars are brighter than others, and we know that some stars are larger and/or closer than others. Consider this for a moment: The light from the farthest star that’s visible to the human eye left that star some 16,000 years ago – so that star could have burned out 15,000 years ago, and we still wouldn’t know it for another 1,000 years!



*A sky full of stars, by ESA/Hubble & NASA, August 1, 2016, image courtesy of WikiCommons.*

### Ancient Views on the Heavens

Though we live in a much-advanced world, in many ways we are not too unlike our ancient ancestors: They were fascinated by the stars as well. Anthropologists suggest that as the rulers of Egypt and Babylonia died, they became gods in the heavens, where their names were assigned to stars. We read of this in the book of the prophet Amos,<sup>3</sup> which is why it’s significant that those same stars bowed down to worship Joseph in his dream.<sup>4</sup> Unlike neighboring cultures, our spiritual ancestors were forbidden from worshipping the sun, the

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 15:5, 22:17, 26:4; Exodus 32:13, Deuteronomy 1:10, 10:22, Nehemiah 9:23, Jeremiah 33:22, Hebrews 11:12..

<sup>2</sup> An obvious reference to the 1957 hit song recorded by Jerry Lee Lewis.

<sup>3</sup> Amos 5:26.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 37:9.

moon and the stars,<sup>5</sup> and in our faith tradition, our God was so great that our God gave us the sun to light the day, and the moon and the stars to light the night.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, according to the psalmist, our God is so great that our God knows the name of every single star!<sup>7</sup>

Balaam prophesied that a star would come forth from Jacob,<sup>8</sup> and the apocalyptic visions of our ancestors were filled with stars as well: of the Christ holding seven stars in his hand,<sup>9</sup> and of the woman clothed with the sun, with 12 stars on her head.<sup>10</sup> We hear stories of a dragon whose tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky<sup>11</sup> and of a ram whose horn threw stars to the ground.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps most assuring, Daniel prophesied that those who lead others to righteousness will shine like the stars in the sky.<sup>13</sup>



*The woman of the apocalypse, with a crown of 12 stars, and the dragon whose tail swept a third of the stars in the sky, from "The Revelation of St. John" by Albrecht Dürer, 1511, image courtesy of WikiCommons.*

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 4:19.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 31:35.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 147:4.

<sup>8</sup> Numbers 24:17.

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 1:16.

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 12:1.

<sup>11</sup> Revelation 12:4.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel 8:10.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel 12:3.

## The Stars and Constellations in the Independent Catholic Nighttime Sky

Primitive human beings spent a lot of time looking up at the stars, and, in many cultures, they imagined that the stars of the nighttime sky form various shapes or figures. Even the Hebrew scriptures speak of these constellations,<sup>14</sup> naming three constellations in particular: the Big Dipper, Orion and the Seven Sisters.<sup>15</sup>

When we gathered three years ago for our first interjurisdictional gathering in Austin, in October 2019, I spoke of the various “vessels” in the Catholic Sea, including the Roman Catholic “supertanker.”<sup>16</sup> While there may be some advantages of being aboard that stable “supertanker,” we’re also aware of the frustrations that accompany the fact that supertankers are not able to “turn on a dime.” As part of that same analogy three years ago, I likened many of the “vessels” within our Independent Catholic movement to much-smaller whale-watching boats, fishing boats, kayaks, dingies, and, yes, even jet skis. (Lord know we have enough Lone Rangers—*episcopi vagantes* and *clerici vagantes*<sup>17</sup>—jetting around on the Catholic Sea!) I also spoke of the various “fleets” or jurisdictions on the Catholic Sea.<sup>18</sup> In fact, at that time, I suggested that the Ascension Alliance is the second-largest “fleet” in the Independent Catholic Sea in terms of the number of clergy it possesses.<sup>19</sup>

Today, I’d like to try a new analogy: that the clergy and communities of the Independent Catholic nighttime sky are like the stars in the nighttime sky, and that the jurisdictions into which they organize themselves are like constellations!

Look [pointing to “constellations”]: There’s the Ecumenical Catholic Communion! And there’s the Catholic Apostolic Church of

<sup>14</sup> 2Kings 23:5, Job 38:32, Isaiah 13:1.

<sup>15</sup> Job 9:9.

<sup>16</sup> J. Mathias, “Old Catholicism and Independent Catholicism: Vessels in the Catholic Sea,” in J. Mathias & M.L. de Uriarte, Eds. (2020), *A New Way of Being Catholic* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press), 29.

<sup>17</sup> I’m not aware of anyone who uses the phrase *clerici vagantes*. I coined it as an acknowledgement that not all “wandering” Independent Catholic clergy are bishops.

<sup>18</sup> Mathias, J. & de Uriarte, M.L., Eds. (2020). *A New Way of Being Catholic*. Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press, 35.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

Antioch! There's CACINA, the Catholic Apostolic Church in North America! And there's the American National Catholic Church! Yikes, do you see that black hole where TOCCUSA – The Old Catholic Church of the U.S. – used to be? And, of course, there's the Ascension Alliance!

### The “Virgo” of Independent Catholicism

For the purpose of today's presentation, if I were to liken the Ascension Alliance to a particular constellation in the nighttime sky – and please don't take offense at this – I would liken the Ascension Alliance to...Virgo! Follow me now.

Virgo is one of the largest constellations in the nighttime sky, and it is visible in the northern hemisphere – just as the Ascension Alliance is largely a phenomenon of the northern hemisphere. My choice of this constellation to characterize the Ascension Alliance also springs from the esteem of the Ascension Alliance for women. If your website is correct, 40% of your clergy are women – which is rare in the Independent Catholic movement!



*Virgo, by Johann Elert Bode (1801), image courtesy of WikiCommons.*

### My History with the Ascension Alliance

Before we get too deeply into our time together, let me sing the praises of the Ascension Alliance as one of the largest, brightest and most recognizable “constellations” within our movement. I’ll be honest: 3.5 years ago, I knew nothing of substance of the Ascension Alliance. I knew no one within the Ascension Alliance, and the Ascension Alliance was merely one name among the names of other Independent Catholic jurisdictions.

After Holy Family stepped out of its relationship with another Independent Catholic jurisdiction in 2018,<sup>20</sup> though, I encouraged my three priests and two deacons at Holy Family to connect with the Independent Catholic jurisdictions with which they felt some *simpatico*. As a result, for example, I reached out to the American National Catholic Church, and Father Libardo Rocha built a relationship with the Spanish-speaking clergy of the California Diocese of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion. I encouraged Deacon Angelita Mendoza-Waterhouse to consider building a relationships with the Ascension Alliance, since you are one of the largest jurisdictions in our nation, and she attended your 2018 and 2019 convocations. That was our first encounter as a parish with the Ascension Alliance.

In the summer of 2019, I experienced the Utrecht Summer School and, greatly impressed by what I learned in Utrecht, I began planning an interjurisdictional gathering of lay and ordained leaders in Austin for October 2019. Three members of your jurisdiction attended that gathering, and I want to acknowledge them by name for taking the risk and investing the necessary resources to travel to Austin, Texas in 2019. They were Archbishop Alan Kemp, Bishop Cathy Chalmers and Bishop Theodore Feldmann. I'll be honest, I was unaware of the history of the Ascension Alliance and the Catholic Apostolic Church of Antioch, so, as you can imagine, I was heartened to learn that our gathering in Austin brought together representatives of both jurisdiction for a time of reconnecting and perhaps even of reconciliation. It was at that time that I was convinced that the Ascension Alliance is "flippin' alright"! Allow me to explain.

### **The Ascension Alliance is "Flippin' Alright"!**

When I was in the seminary, an old Franciscan priest, Father Joel Burgos, had just returned to the U.S. after some 20 to 30 years in Zambia, Africa. He tried to convince us that the Gabon spiders in Africa are this big – but he also left us with a joke that captures exactly how I feel about the Ascension Alliance.

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<sup>20</sup> At that time, Holy Family became a large, bishopless Independent Catholic community, like St. Stanislaus Polish Catholic Church in St. Louis, Missouri; Rabbouni Catholic Community in Louisville, Kentucky; and All Saints Priory in Ridgewood, New York.



Father Joel told the story of Father John, the local parish priest who went fishing with his parishioners, and we'll cleanse this joke by using the phrases "son-of-a-gun," okay? Father John didn't know anything about fishing, but he had the luck of catching the largest fish that day – it must have been this big! – and when Father John pulled that big fish into the boat, his shocked parishioner exclaimed, "That is one big son-of-a-gun!" (Remember: We're cleansing this story.) Father John's face registered the shock of hearing such language from one of his parishioners, and his parishioner, now very embarrassed, lied to his priest. He said, "No, Father John, that's what this fish is called. It's called a...son-of-a-gun fish!" Huh, in addition to having the largest catch, Father John learned something new today!

Father John took the fish back to the rectory, and Sister Margarita was there to greet him. He opened the trunk of his car, and Sister Margarita remarked about the size of his catch. "I know," Father John said, "That is one big son-of-a-gun!" (Remember: We're cleansing this story.) Sister Margarita's face registered the shock of hearing such language from her priest, and, seeing her shock, he explained, "No, Sister Margarita, that's what this fish is called. It's called a...son-of-a-gun fish!" Huh, Sr. Margarita also learned something new today!

As luck would have it, Father John and Sister Margarita hosted their bishop that night, and, you guessed it, they prepared that fish for dinner. Now seated at table, Father John cut into his catch, tasted it, and exclaimed, "This is one good son-of-a-gun!" (Remember: We're cleansing this story.) Sister Margarita tasted it and agreed, "This is the best son-of-a-gun I've ever tasted!"

The bishop looked at Father John, and the bishop looked at Sister Margarita, and he said (and we're cleansing the story here): "Y'all are flippin' alright!"

After that experience in October 2019, seeing how members of the Ascension Alliance took the risk and traveled to Austin for our first interjurisdictional gathering, and seeing how Archbishop Alan was willing to celebrate with our parish community the sacrament of Confirmation, I could only conclude that you, our siblings of the Ascension Alliance, are "flippin' alright!"

After that initial gathering three years ago, many of you within the Ascension Alliance have continued to build bridges with other lay and ordained leaders within the larger Independent Catholic movement.

- COVID struck in March 2020, and some of you attended our first-ever 2020 Virtual Summer School. Y'all are "flippin' alright!"
- Many of you have participated in our interjurisdictional virtual happy hours and clergy coffee chats, representing the Ascension Alliance to the larger Independent Catholic movement. Y'all are "flippin' alright!"

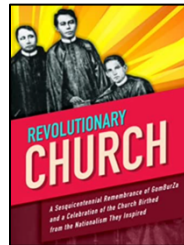
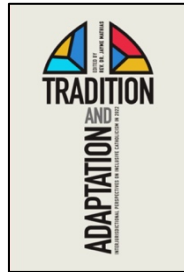


*Participants in a 2020 Zoom conversation of Independent Catholic laity & clergy, including various members of the Ascension Alliance.*

- Some of you have contributed to our bimonthly publication, *Extraordinary Catholics* magazine. Y'all are "flippin' alright!"
- Some of you participated in our second interjurisdictional gathering, "Saints in Sin City," in Las Vegas in November 2021, which resulted in our book, *Our Better Version of Catholicism*.<sup>21</sup> Y'all are "flippin' alright!"

<sup>21</sup> J. Mathias & M.L. de Uriarte (2022), *Our Better Version of Catholicism* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press).

- Some of you participated in the “think tanks” that led to our recent book, *Tradition and Adaptation*.<sup>22</sup> Y’all are “flippin’ alright!”
- Some of you participated in our third interjurisdictional gathering, a sesquicentennial celebration of GomBurZa, in Austin in May 2022, which resulted in our book *Revolutionary Church*.<sup>23</sup> Archbishop Alan researched and shared a marvelous presentation on the Philippine Independent Church as a social movement, and he presided at the diaconal ordination of Deacon Stephen Rodriguez. Y’all are “flippin’ alright!”
- The Ascension Alliance also played a key role during our 2022 Virtual Summer School. You collaborated with friends of the Catholic Apostolic Church of Antioch to shed light on the lives and legacies of Herman Adrian Spruit and Meri Louise Spruit within our movement. Y’all are “flippin’ alright!”



## Inclusive

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A Uniquely American Expression  
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Remembering Herman Adrian Spruit  
& Meri Louise Spruit



by members of  
the Catholic Apostolic Church of Antioch  
& the Ascension Alliance

*A flyer from our 2022 Inclusive Catholic Summer School, featuring a presentation by the Ascension Alliance on the lives and legacy of Herman Adrian & Meri Louise Spruit.*

<sup>22</sup> J. Mathias, Ed. (2022), *Tradition and Adaptation: Interjurisdictional Perspectives on Inclusive Catholicism in 2022* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press).

<sup>23</sup> J. Mathias, Ed. (2022). *Revolutionary Church: A Sesquicentennial Remembrance of GomBurZa and a Celebration of the Church Birthed from the Nationalism They Inspired* (Austin, Texas: Extraordinary Catholics Press).

- I also have to brag on your Ascension Theological College, which is a model for formation and education within our movement. There are few formation programs in our movement that rival what you have in the Ascension Theological College!

Now that I've bragged on the Ascension Alliance, I'll give you a chance: In the chat box, jot a few of the things that you most love about the Ascension Alliance—those things within the Ascension Alliance that bring light to our world and make you say that the Ascension Alliance is “flippin' alright”! On your mark, get set, go!

I'm seeing your comments: that Archbishop Roberto is a light, as is Archbishop Alan. Mother Barbara, too. I'm seeing other responses; freedom, harmony, scholarship, diversity.

## Two Lions

As I think about the Ascension Alliance, I'm reminded of the stories of 2 lions.

The first lion sang a song that went something like this. [Note: Due to copyright restrictions, the lyrics of the song of the Cowardly Lion in “The Wizard of Oz” are not reprinted here.]

Do we all recognize that song? It comes from the 1939 film “The Wizard of Oz,” which was based on the 1900 children's fantasy novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.<sup>24</sup> It tells the story of a young lady named Dorothy, and she finds herself in a strange, new land called Oz. But she's not alone. Dorothy finds herself in Oz with her dog, Toto, and they soon meet two new friends: the Scarecrow, who needs a brain, and the Tin Man, who needs a heart.

And now the story gets good: Dorothy and Toto are walking along the Yellow Brick Road with the Scarecrow and Tin Man when they come to a dark, dark forest. And they begin imagining that this forest could be filled with...“lions and tigers and bears (oh my!), lions and tigers and bears (oh my!).”



*Bert Lahr  
as the Cowardly Lion, 1939,  
courtesy of WikiCommons.*

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<sup>24</sup> L.F. Baum (1900), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Chicago, Illinois: George M. Hill Company).

Suddenly, from behind a tree jumps the large, fierce Lion who lets out a bellowing roar! Do you remember the scene? The Lion scares Toto, causing Dorothy to slap the Lion and say, “You’re nothing but a cowardly lion!” And what happens from that moment on? We know him as the Cowardly Lion!

This is my question for you: Do cowardly lions really jump out from behind trees, trying to scare people? Wouldn’t a cowardly lion shudder in fear and hide behind the tree, hoping not to be seen? Instead, what we see here is that this Lion didn’t have a clear sense of who he was, and was thus more easily influenced by the words and perceptions of others. Ascension Alliance, it’s important that you, at your young age, have a clear sense of who you are as a jurisdiction.

When I think of the Ascension Alliance, I also think of another lion. His story was told in the 1994 Disney film, “Lion King.” It’s the story of a lion cub named Simba, whose father, Mufasa, was the king of the animal kingdom. So, when Mufasa died, naturally Simba was to succeed him—except that Simba’s evil uncle, Scar, tried to kill him, and Simba ended up in the wilderness. There he met two new friends, Pumba and Timon, who convinced Simba to live a carefree life: “Hakuna matata!” Do you remember the story? The turning point comes one night, when Simba is walking beside a body of water. He hears the voice of his deceased father call to him from the heavens: “Simba, remember who you are!” He looks down into the water and what does he see? His image as king! And suddenly Simba remembers who he is.



*Disney's "The Lion King,"  
July 8, 2010,  
courtesy of WikiCommons.*

Ascension Alliance, my message to you today is simple: Remember who you are!

### **Remember Who You Are!**

After nearly three years of interjurisdictional collaboration, many of us from outside the Ascension Alliance more clearly see who and what the Ascension Alliance is. You, no doubt, more clearly see

yourselves as well. Like Simba, we gather here at this convocation to remember – and to celebrate – who you are!

Ascension Alliance, remember who you are! From what I know of you, what you are might best be summarized in the following points:

- Like so many other Independent Catholic jurisdictions, the Ascension Alliance is largely a community of clergy, and not a community of communities. You possess some small communities and ministries, but, from this outsider's perspective, the great gift of the Ascension Alliance is that you bring together and support your clergy!
- The Ascension Alliance is unabashedly non-Roman Catholic. Whereas so many communities and ministries throughout our movement (including my own) are strikingly similar to Roman Catholic communities, praying the Roman rite and using the Roman lectionary, the Ascension Alliance is unafraid to blaze its own trail, even encouraging seminarians to create their own rites.
- The Ascension Alliance is unafraid to be fringe, to be “weird” – and I say that with all respect. The contemporary English word “weird” comes from an Old English word, *wyrd*, which literally means “holy” or “not of this world.” (You can imagine how I love to reframe Austin's unofficial motto – “Keep Austin Weird” – as “Keep Austin Holy”!) Through your highlighting of mysticism, spiritual sources, traditions and practices that might be considered fringe by others of mainstream traditions, the Ascension Alliance is willing to explore roads less traveled.
- The Ascension Alliance reflects in our world the great diversity of the early Church, reminding us that the pre-Constantinian Church strove toward unity but was anything but uniform.
- Finally, the Ascension Alliance has demonstrated during these past three years how it “plays well” with others. Whereas some Independent Catholic jurisdictions will have nothing to do with interjurisdictional and ecumenical efforts, the Ascension Alliance has been on the leading edge of ecumenism and interjurisdictional bridge-building within our movement!

Ascension Alliance, remember who you are! Those points are from an outsider's perspective. You likely do well to consider your own perspectives on what makes the Ascension Alliance unique and what gifts you offer to the world as a jurisdiction.

## Findings from a September 2022 Survey of Independent Catholic Laity

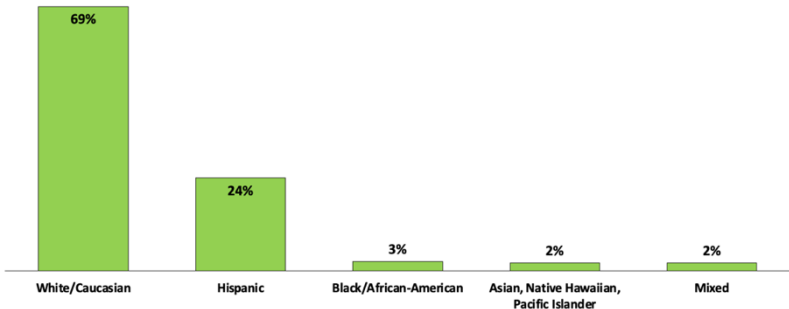
The Ascension Alliance is admittedly not famous for large communities or congregations. Should you be interested in growth, though, our recent survey of laity in September 2022 shares numerous insights into the people who have found a home within our movement. This survey of Independent Catholic laity resulted from an August meeting of the pastors of the large, bishopless Independent Catholic communities in the U.S., where we agreed that we would replicate among Independent Catholic laity the research study of Dr. Julie Byrne, the author of *The Other Catholics*. Nearly 250 lay people responded to our September survey. I’ll be honest: We had an underwhelming response from the Ascension Alliance – but that also means that we now possess the opportunity of replicating this study in the future, and this time solely with Ascension Alliance laity!

Are you sitting down? Are you ready for the responses from that first-of-its-kind survey of nearly 250 Independent Catholic laity?

Before we jump in and look at the data, we remember that we need to be careful about generalizing what we see here to the entire population of Independent Catholic laity in the U.S. What we see here is certainly represented of the four large, bishopless communities from which many of the responses come – so we’ll speak of these data simply as representing this sample of respondents.

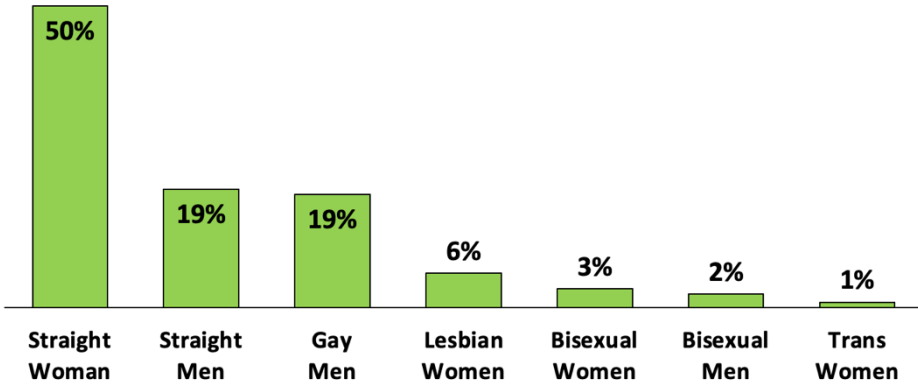
242 laypeople participated in this survey. Let’s look at their demographics. As we see here, 69% of them are White, which is likely representative of our larger movement. Look around this Zoom room, we see that the Ascension Alliance, too, is primarily comprised of White faces.

**Race/Ethnicity of Lay Respondents**



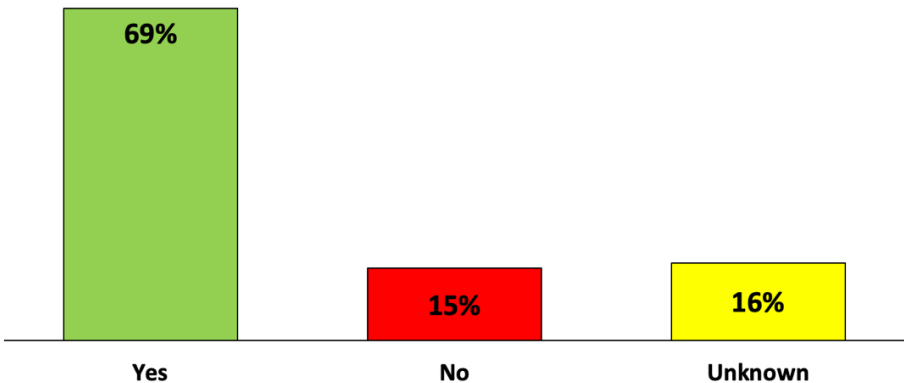
69% of respondents self-identify as straight, and 31% as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. There's no reason to think that this isn't largely representative of the Ascension Alliance.

## Sexual Orientation of Independent Catholic Lay Respondents



Interestingly, 69% of the laity in this sample are also former Roman Catholics. Sociologist Geert Hofstede speaks of culture as the “software of the mind,”<sup>25</sup> and we recognize that many people have come to us with a certain “programming” from the Roman Catholic culture.

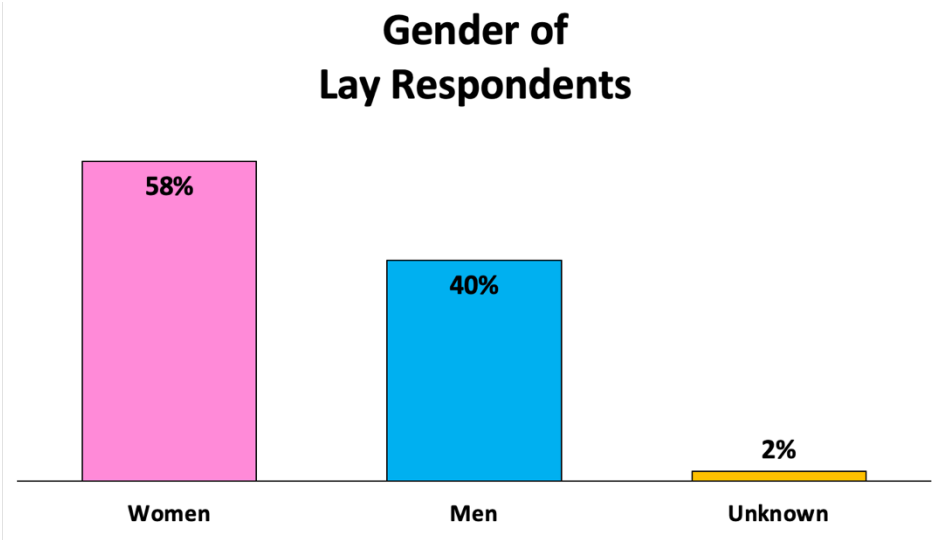
## Independent Catholic Lay Respondents Who Are Former Roman Catholics



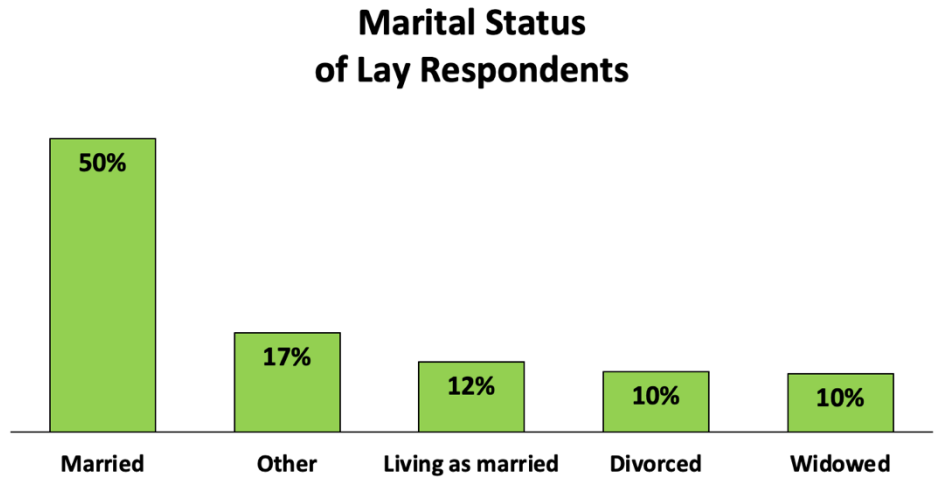
<sup>25</sup> G. Hofstede & G.J. Hofstede (2005), *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York, New York: McGraw Hill).



58% of respondents are women, and 40% are men. If this is true of the Ascension Alliance and/or of the larger Independent Catholic population, then we might expect to find more lay (and, in the ideal world, ordained) leaders who are women than men.

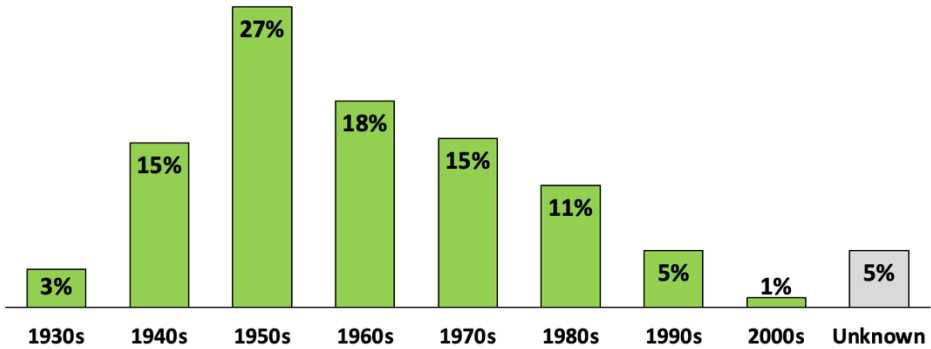


50% of respondents are married, 17 are single, 12% are living with another person outside of marriage, 10% are divorced, and 10% are widowed.



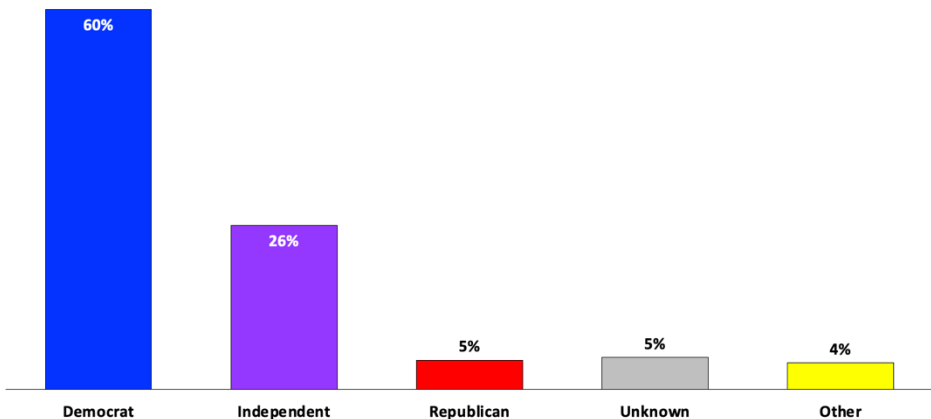
The age of respondents skews older, with a mean (or average) age of 59 and a median age of 61. Look around this room: There is no reason to believe that the Ascension Alliance greatly differs from this.

### Decade of Birth of Lay Respondents

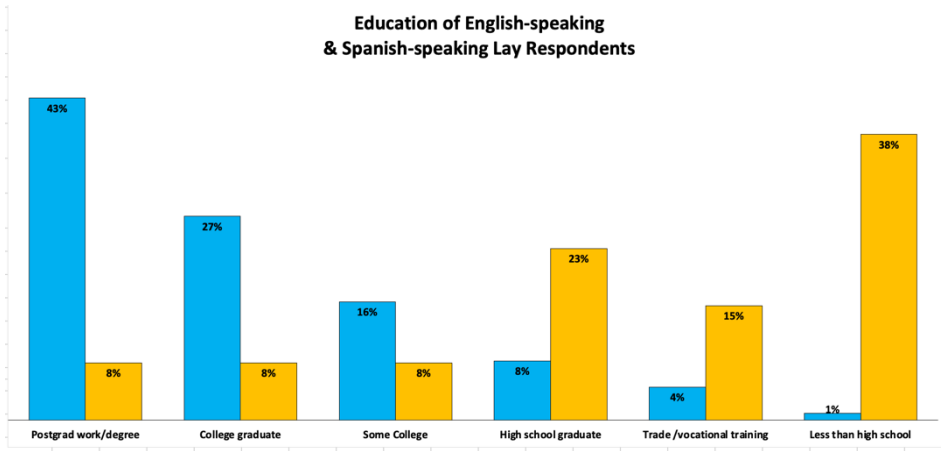


This is interesting: Let's look at our politics. At Holy Family, I'm fond of saying that "we check our politics at the door." Outside our church doors, 60% of respondents self-identify as Democrat, 25% as Independent, and 5% as Republican.

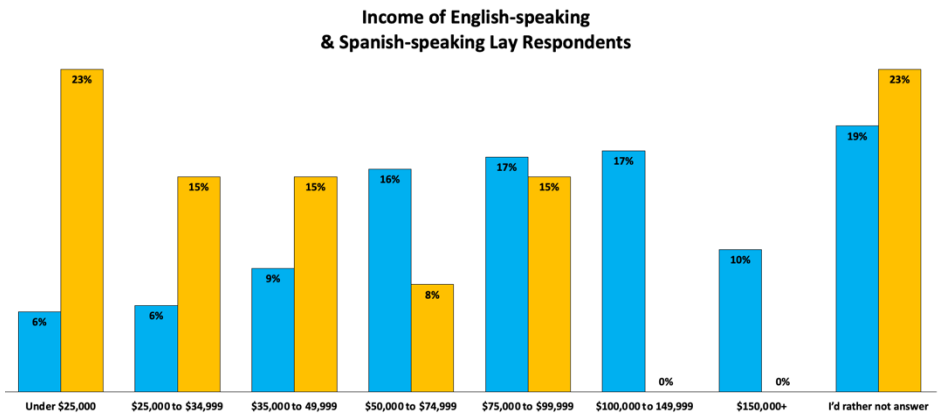
### Political Self-identification of Lay Respondents



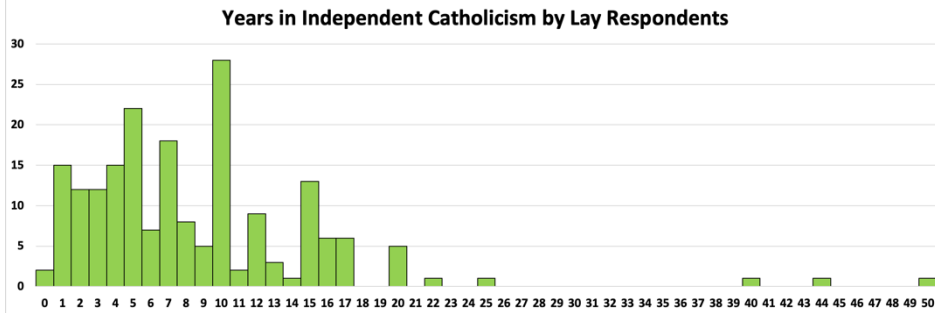
Here we see the education of respondents. When we examine these data disaggregated by language, we see that English-speaking respondents (the blue bars) are well-educated, with 70% being college graduates, while 61% of Spanish-speaking respondents have no studies beyond high school.



Not surprisingly, then, English-speaking respondents possess higher levels of income. This is witnessed in bilingual (English/Spanish) communities where Spanish-speaking persons often outnumber English-speaking persons, but where English-speaking persons financially sustain our ministries.

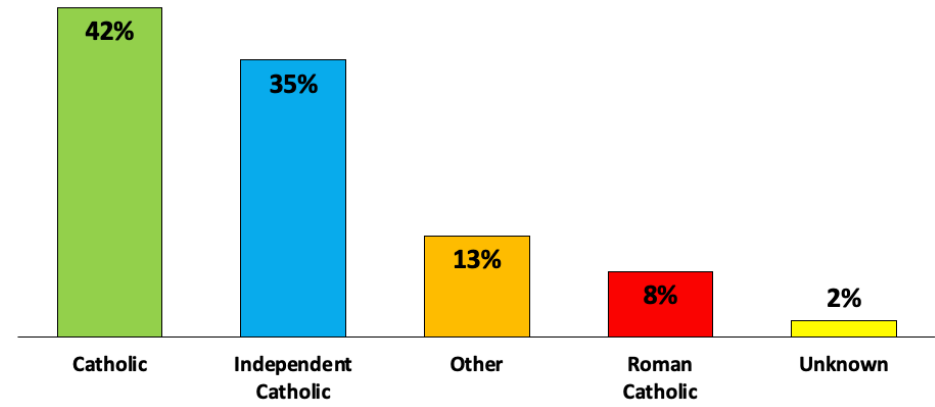


Respondents have been part of the Independent Catholic movement for an average of 8.5 years. This is no surprise, since various large, bishopless U.S. communities have existed for just over ten years now.



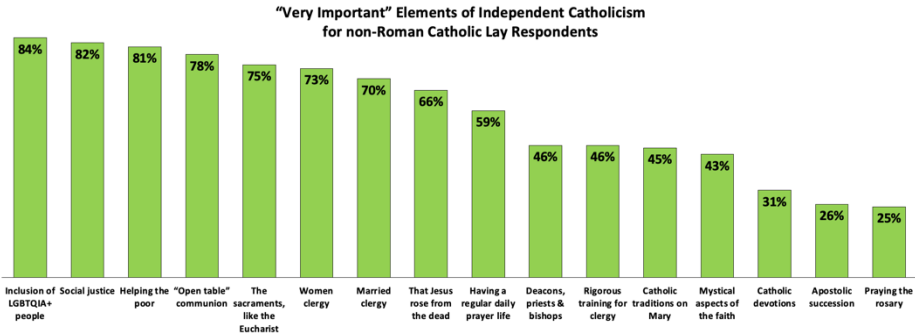
In addition to Dr. Byrne’s study, we asked respondents how they self-identify. Here you see that 35% self-identify as Independent Catholic, compared with 42% who self-identify simply as Catholic. This lends some support to my thesis that many Independent Catholics see themselves as “Catholic-but-not-Roman-Catholic,” that is, as more “Catholic” than “Independent Catholic.” 13% of respondents self-identify as Roman Catholic, and the 13% of “Other” include such self-identifications as Old Catholic, Polish Catholic, Christian Congregational, Episcopal, Methodist, Protestant, “Post-Catholic,” “Recovering Catholic” and the three respondents who self-identify as Ecumenical Catholic.

### Self-identification of Lay Respondents

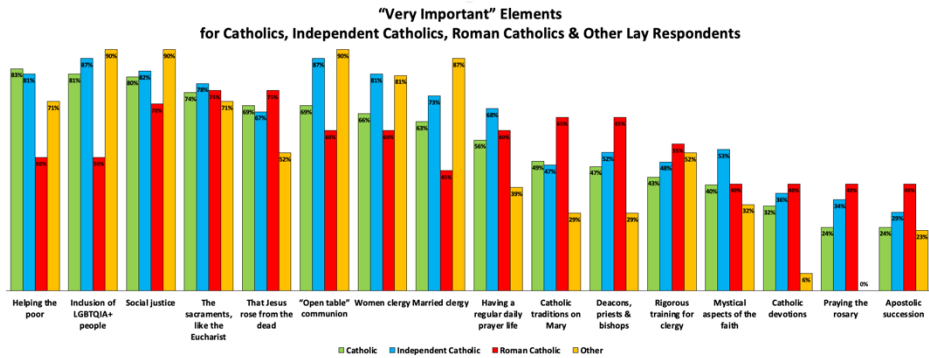




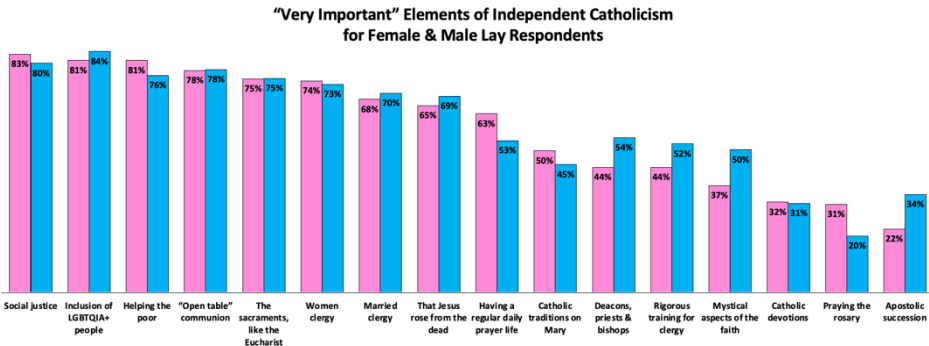
Which elements of Independent Catholicism are “very important” to laity? Here we see that the highest percentages of respondents agree that inclusivity, social justice, and helping the poor are “very important.”



When we disaggregate these responses by self-identification, we see that higher numbers of Roman Catholics (the red bars) see hierarchy, Catholic traditions and apostolic succession as “very important.”

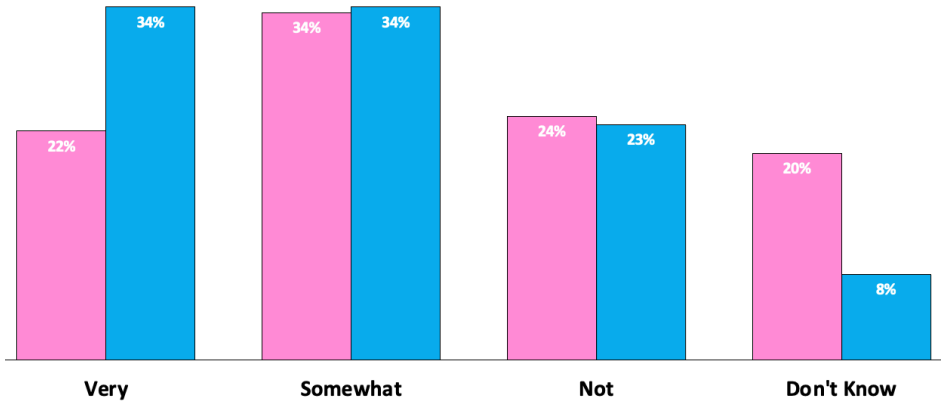


We can also see differences in beliefs by gender.



Let’s drill down on apostolic succession. Here we see that apostolic succession is considered “very important” to a higher percentage of men than women.

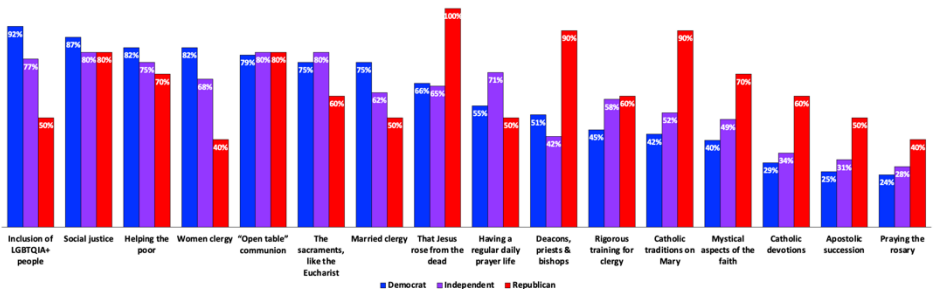
### The Importance of Apostolic Succession for Female & Male Lay Respondents



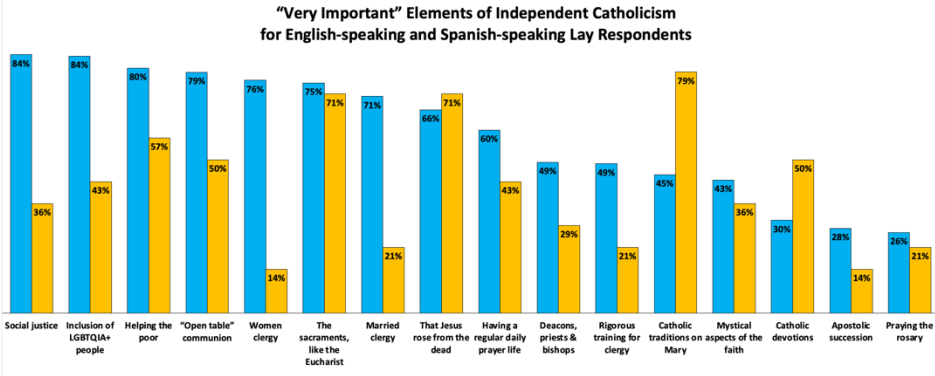
As the next bar chart shows, apostolic succession is also more important to Republicans than Democrats. Conversely, 23% of lay respondents tell us that apostolic succession is “not important” for them. Let’s come back to apostolic succession later.

We look at political differences: Democrats tend to esteem inclusivity, social justice, helping the poor and women clergy as “very important,” while Republicans see Jesus’ resurrection, hierarchy and tradition as “very important.”

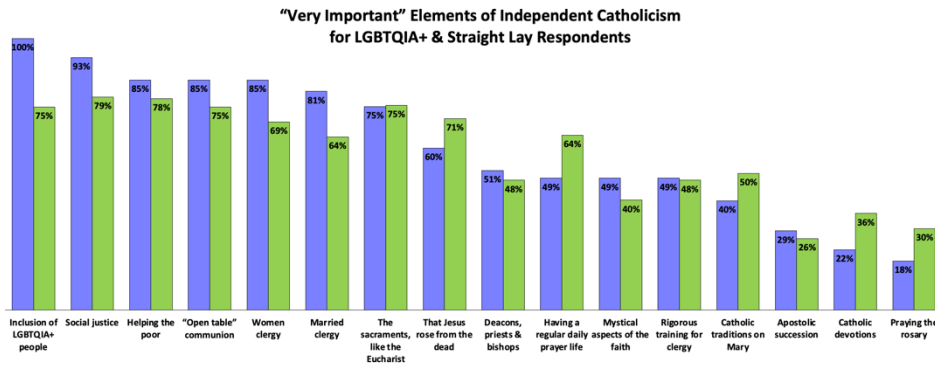
### “Very Important” Elements for Democratic, Independent & Republican Lay Respondents



When we disaggregate these data by language group, we see that Spanish-speaking respondents deem Catholic sacraments, traditions on Mary, and devotions as “very important,” as well as their desire that their children grow up to be Catholic (63%, versus 33% among English-speaking respondents).

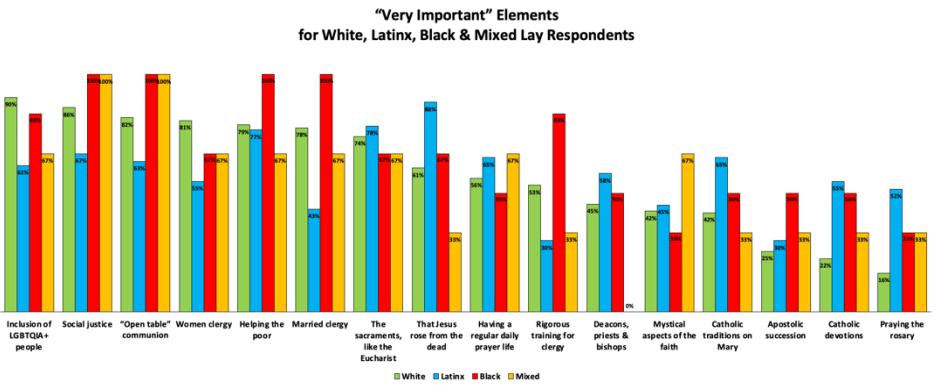


When we disaggregate by sexual orientation, we find that those who self-identify as LGBTQIA+ esteem inclusion (100%), social justice, open table communion, helping the poor, women clergy and married clergy, while those who self-identify as straight tend to respond in higher percentages than LGBTQIA+ persons on such factors as belief in Jesus’ resurrection, the importance of daily prayer, Catholic traditions on Mary, Catholic devotions, and praying the rosary.

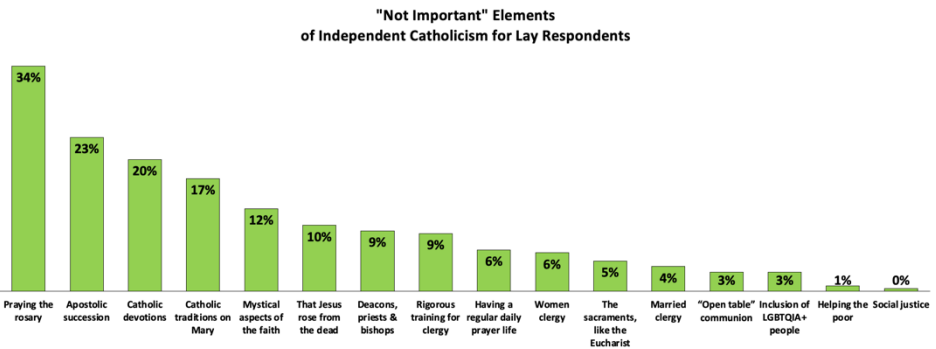




When we disaggregate by race/ethnicity, we see that respondents who self-identify as White are more interested in inclusion, social justice, open communion, women clergy and married clergy. Latinx respondents believe more strongly believe in the importance of Jesus’ resurrection, hierarchy, Catholic traditions on Mary, Catholic devotions and praying the rosary. Black respondents more strongly believe in the importance of helping the poor, married clergy, and rigorous training for clergy. Respondents of mixed race more strongly believe in the importance of a regular daily prayer life and the mystical elements of our faith.

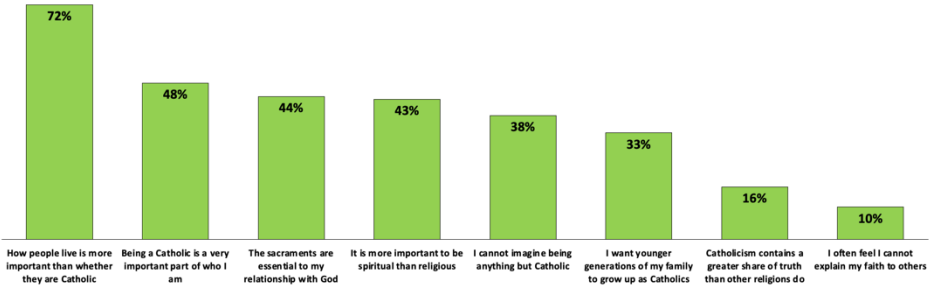


Which elements of Independent Catholicism from Dr. Byrne’s study are most widely considered “not important” to this sample of respondents? Catholic devotions, praying the rosary, and apostolic succession.



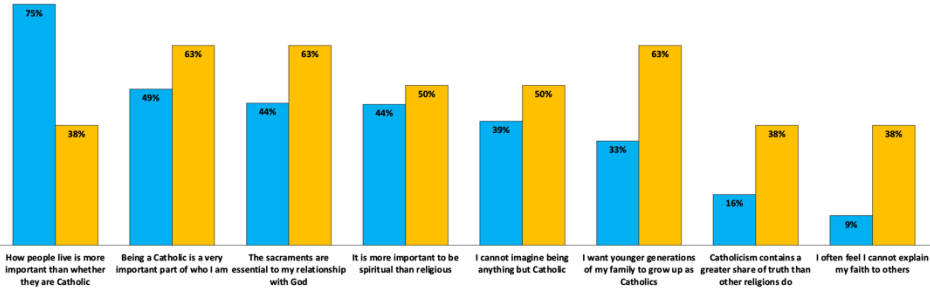
From Dr. Byrne’s study, we tested a number of beliefs with this sample. Here you can see that they most strongly agree with the statement that how people live is more important than whether they are Catholic.

**Beliefs with which Independent Catholic Lay Respondents Strongly Agree**



When we disaggregate beliefs by language groups, we see that the only belief held by a higher percentage of English-speaking respondents (the blue bars) is that how people live is more important than whether they are Catholic. Higher percentages of Spanish-speaking respondents agree on the importance of all other beliefs.

**Beliefs with which English-speaking & Spanish-speaking Lay Respondents Most Strongly Agree**



This is merely a foretaste of the results of this September study of Independent Catholic laity. More will come after the pastors of our large, bishopless U.S. communities review these data at their next meeting on October 25. With this survey, though, it’s as if the laity of our movement are saying to us: Remember who we are!

Ready to share? Let’s take 20 seconds to type in the chat box what most strikes us about these data from our recent study of Independent Catholic laity. What struck you most about these findings? On your mark, get set, go!

If indeed the Ascension Alliance is be interested in growing its presence among the laity who find themselves at home within our movement, we do well to listen to them and remember who they are!

### **Church In Action**

When the Ecumenical Catholic Communion gathered for its biannual Holy Synod earlier this week, they took as their theme “Church in Action.” During my time with them, I shared with them the song “Becoming What We Pray” by Father James Marchionda. It’s one of those rare songs that really captures what we are called to be, as a Church in action. Listen to Father Marchionda’s lyrics. [Note: Due to copyright restrictions, the lyrics of Father Marchionda’s song are not reprinted here. I encourage you to find the lyrics online.]

Sisters and brothers of the Ascension Alliance, let’s become what we pray! Then we will see the fruits of our outward focus, not only in numerical growth, but also in the amount of light that shines from the many “stars” and “constellations” of our movement! When we are a Church in action, we will shine more brightly in the Independent Catholic nighttime sky, and we will be the “light of the world” that Jesus called us to be!<sup>26</sup>

As we hear the challenge of Father Marchionda’s song, to “truly practice what we pray,” let’s take a moment to reflect on how the Ascension Alliance might better “practice what [you] pray.” In the chat box, let’s take 20 seconds to share our ideas on how the Ascension Alliance might better “practice what [you] pray.” On your mark, get set, go!

### **Conclusion**

I conclude by returning to our initial analogy of the stars in the nighttime sky. The scriptures speak of various stars, but perhaps the most famous star is one that we have not yet mentioned. It’s the report of a star that...moved! Of course, nearly all the stars in the nighttime sky appear to move as our earth rotates on its axis, but there was something special about one star: Though astronomers readily tell us of the impossibility of this, there was one star in Matthew’s account

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew 5:14.

of the infancy narrative that appeared to move through the sky and come to rest over the newborn King.<sup>27</sup> It was a star in action, reportedly spurring magi from afar to follow its guiding light. Like the Church in action, that star moved, which is why we celebrate it today every time we sing: “Oh, star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright. Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light!”

Friends of the Ascension Alliance, let’s truly be a Church in action, a Church on the move, following that “westward-leading, still-proceeding” Spirit that beckons us into the unknown. Let’s follow the promptings of the Spirit who is bringing to birth a new way of being Catholic here in the Ascension Alliance and who is calling us to serve God’s people in new ways!

Friends of the Ascension Alliance, I pray for you. I pray that you – as individuals, as communities and as a jurisdiction – might continue to follow the promptings of the Spirit, bringing greater light into this world. And I look forward to celebrating with you all that you will continue to accomplish together and all the light that you will continue to bring to our world during the years to come!

### **Concluding Hymn**

As we reflect on our mission of bringing light to this world as “stars” and “constellations” in the Independent Catholic “nighttime sky,” the words of liturgical theologian Ruth Duck ring in my ears. Nearly 40 years ago, Marty Haugen set her words to music, to the tune of Beach Spring, or “God of Day & God of Darkness.” Let’s conclude by praying these words together!

[All conclude by singing, “As a Fire Is Meant for Burning.” Due to copyright restrictions, the words are not reprinted in this work, but you can easily find them online.]

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew 2:9.