

An evolving personal spirituality is reshaping Catholic identity

Kevin Liston June 2026

Since the mid-1900s, there has been a significant shift among Catholics to thinking of faith and spirituality in personal terms. Questions of authority, conscience, community, and mission have been and still are central. Previously, Catholic theology often leaned toward universal principles, fixed ways of thinking and a more institutional emphasis. Vatican II, influenced by thinkers such as Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan, brought attention to the personal experience of Catholics as believers and choosers.

Faith has come to be understood less as assent to propositions and more as a personal encounter with God. Human experience and conscience are now given more recognition as the context of an authentic (holy) and moral life.

Theology consolidated its move from theory into Church life at Vatican II. The Council described the Church as “People of God” (not just hierarchy), emphasised human dignity and freedom of conscience, and recognised the role of the laity in the Church’s mission. Greater lay participation (parish councils, ministries), liturgical reform and openness to dialogue with the modern world resulted.

The moral life is now seen as responsible personal judgment before God not obedience. The value of every person and their rights, and freedom and responsibility are central. Morality focuses on intention, context and personal discernment.

The momentum for change, that Vatican II was one expression of, gave rise to small groups, movements, and communities such as YCW, Teams, and Marriage Encounter. A new appreciation of difference within unity and a new language of participation, collaboration and co-responsibility emerged. (The roots of synodality).

Catholic social teaching received a new prominence, especially regarding the dignity and value of every person and the importance of community and solidarity. Further developments included Catholic involvement in civil rights, advocacy for refugees and other marginalised people, and the ecological vision later articulated by Pope Francis.

A powerful new reality has come to prominence: The *Church is not “them” - it is “us.” We are Church.* This has played out in lay-led initiatives and organisations, calls for inclusion and reform and greater willingness to speak out, question, and contribute. For many, it means gathering to celebrate eucharist in their own creative ways. At its best this produces mature, responsible Catholic identity.

These major shifts were not without tensions on issues like sexuality, authority and diversity, and questions like: *How far does personal conscience extend?* These remain among the ongoing tensions in the Church today.

The turn to personal spirituality has had a mixed reception in the church; it has never been fully integrated. Instead, the Church has lived with a dual dynamic: a) A trajectory of personal spirituality, internal dialogue, conscience and participation, and b) An institutional continuity with hierarchy, doctrine and centralised authority.

These are not opposites but they are often in tension as different sections of the faith community emphasise one more than the other. An evolutionary-historical perspective helps to ease the tension.

The heightened attention to personal spirituality leads us to see more clearly that faith happens in real persons, in real lives, in real communities. It encourages us to search for the meaning and purpose inherent in our living and everyday experience, to discover what God might be like through our relationships and efforts at helping others.

From a church point of view, the shift to the personal gained renewed energy, with pope Francis and the concept of synodality as a way of being Church (though the reality is still to be realised) and emphasis on listening and discernment. However, implementation is uneven, resistance exists and many Catholics still feel unheard or disconnected.

The question, then, is: How do we hold together personal and institution, freedom and belonging, and agency and unity. Making this happen is our task here and now. This does not make being a Catholic any easier but it does give it a more solid grounding, purpose and direction.

It is both a challenge and an opportunity for all of us.