

# Footprints: faith, values and religious experience among Argentine youth

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## ABSTRACT

This article characterizes Argentine youth in relation to their beliefs and values. Religiosity, a key aspect of identity formation, gains particular relevance at this stage of life, as it offers frameworks of meaning that help young people interpret their place in the world, face existential dilemmas, and shape the values that guide their decisions and relationships. The study draws on a survey of 604 Argentine youth aged 18–29, complemented by insights gathered through focus groups. It forms part of a broader project led by the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome, in collaboration with the GAD3 agency, involving 4,889 young people from eight countries. The search for transcendence, the need to believe—even among those unaffiliated with any specific faith—and the centrality of personal and autonomous forms of spirituality stand out. These findings invite renewed approaches to youth and religiosity and offer guidance for pastoral initiatives attentive to contemporary ethical and value-based searches.

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## 1. Introduction

Youth, as a stage of life, is associated with the search for identity, the development of values, and autonomous decision-making. During this period, young people face a series of internal and external challenges and changes that lead them to explore who they are, who the other is, and how to position themselves in relation to the world and the transcendent (Fabbri 1979; Maffei 2008). Religiosity, in this sense, serves as a guiding dimension in shaping their worldview and social interactions. As Peterson (2001) notes, religions are worldviews expressed not only through beliefs but also through narratives and symbols that guide action. According to their beliefs, the ways in which young people engage with the educational system, enter the workforce, transition from their family of origin to forming their own family, and

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embrace parenthood acquire significance, transforming the culture in which they are embedded through their life decisions (Ratzinger 2013; Margulis 1996).

This article delves into the responses of Argentine youth included in a broader study conducted by the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (2023),<sup>1</sup> with the support of the Spanish agency GAD3. The study involved eight countries: Argentina, Brazil, Spain, the Philippines, Italy, Kenya, Mexico, and the United Kingdom, with 4,889 young people surveyed. Participants were selected through a quota sampling method based on sex, age, and geography (according to the population distribution in each country). The survey was conducted using the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) data collection method and included a combination of closed-ended questions (e.g., multiple-choice and Likert scales for quantitative data) and open-ended questions to gather qualitative insights.

The survey was administered to 604 Argentine youth aged 18–29, and the data collected were analyzed using quantitative techniques with the application of the SPSS statistical software. The initial analysis began with descriptive statistics, which involved calculating frequencies, means, and percentages to summarize the data. The next step was cross-tabulation to examine the relationships between different variables.

The results were validated and contextualized through the qualitative methodology of focus groups to further explore the beliefs, values, expectations, and religiosity of young people. This technique allows for capturing the interaction and exchange of ideas among participants, facilitating a deeper analysis of how they construct and negotiate their identities and belief systems in a group setting.

The focus group consisted of 14 participants selected through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in terms of gender, socioeconomic status, educational and employment status, geographic diversity—considering the major urban centers in Argentina, such as AMBA, Córdoba, Rosario, and Buenos Aires—and religious affiliation, aiming to achieve a heterogeneous representation. The session took place on Saturday, 5 September 2024, lasted one and a half hours, and was conducted remotely via Zoom from the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, within a framework of institutionalism and confidentiality.

During the session, a semi-structured guide was used to facilitate the discussion around topics of interest, allowing space for spontaneous issues to arise. The interactions were recorded and later transcribed for analysis using thematic coding techniques, which enabled the identification of discourse patterns, consensus, and divergences.

The group was moderated by the authors of this article, whose aim is to characterize the population aged 18 to 29 residing in Argentina based on a series of dimensions related to their connection with the transcendent, their personal and social values regarding issues defined by the global agenda. From these theoretical-methodological perspectives, emphasis is placed on the concept of ‘relationship’, an inseparable term from both the concept of ‘identity’ (Malo 2016) and the concept of ‘religion’.

What is happening to the faith of young people? How do they perceive the transcendent? What image of God do they hold? How do they view the Church, and why have some strengthened or lost their faith? What drives their trust in God?

Do they retain notions of sin and forgiveness? For Catholics, how do they understand and practice their faith? For agnostics or atheists, what factors weakened their trust in God, and what keeps them distant from faith? Do believers and non-believers share social values, and are these values connected to religious beliefs? This article aims to address these and other questions by exploring the perspectives of young Argentines on faith, social values, and global issues.

### ***1.1. Argentina: a young, Europeanized, and diverse country***

In contrast to European or Asian countries, Argentina is a young nation with a history spanning just over two hundred years. Bearing a strong Catholic heritage, it developed with a European gaze. This perspective, which persists to this day, can be attributed to the fact that, historically, Argentina's population was shaped by multiple waves of European immigration, encouraged by government policies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, aimed at promoting the economic and demographic development (Cristóforis 2019; Devoto 2002; Devoto and Otero 2003; Novick 2008).

Covering 3,761,274 square kilometers, Argentina is the eighth-largest country globally, the fourth in the Americas, and the second in Latin America. This vast territory reflects significant geographical and cultural diversity.

As of the 2022 census, Argentina's population is nearing 50 million, with an adult literacy rate exceeding 99%. It ranks second in the region on the Human Development Index (HDI), after Chile (UN 2024). According to the 2021 electoral roll, 8,337,914 Argentines are aged 18–29, with a ratio of 107 women for every 100 men.

Argentina's demographic history sets it apart from other Latin American nations, with immigrants playing a key role in shaping its population (Modolo 2016; Otero 2007). Between 1857 and 1924, 5.5 million immigrants arrived, predominantly Italians (39%) and Spaniards (35%), who accounted for nearly half the population of Buenos Aires and 30% of the national total in 1914 (Fernández 2017). While immigration slowed during the world wars, it resumed in the late 1920s and continued until the mid-1950s (Modolo 2016; Schwarzstin 2001).

Since 1960, European immigration to Argentina has declined, while migration from neighboring countries has steadily increased, particularly from Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, and Venezuela (Benencia 2008; Paccela and Curtis 2008; Vila 2008). According to the National Registry of Persons (RENAPER), as of August 2023, Argentina hosts 3,094,372 foreign residents. Paraguayans constitute the largest group (30%, or 916,136 people), followed by Bolivians (671,193), Peruvians (291,181), and Venezuelans (236,929). Asian communities, mainly from China and South Korea, are also growing. Conversely, since 2001, more than one million Argentines have emigrated, primarily to Spain (400,000), the United States (300,000), and Italy (150,000), as well as to neighboring countries like Chile and Uruguay.

### ***1.2. Religiosity in the Argentine population***

Historically, Argentina is a Catholic country. Its faith is linked to the Spanish colonization of the Americas and the subsequent waves of migration that helped shape

its national identity. Initially, the Spanish, followed by Italians and the French from the second half of the 19th century, brought the faith over, which grew and remained strong for decades. In the 20th century, the population received an influx of other immigrants who gradually shifted the Catholic profile toward agnostic, anarchist, and more distant positions from the Catholic Church. For example, the arrival of Spanish immigrants fleeing the Francoist regime in Spain (Güenaga 2013) starting in the 1930s contributed to new religious perspectives, along with secular state policies that made an impact on the educational system. Of course, these are not the only factors shaping beliefs, but they help explain the decline of Catholic faithful in the country.

In Argentina, there are surveys and demographic studies that have explored religiosity within the population. In addition to the censuses—religion was only asked in those conducted in 1947 and 1960—the most recognized and reliable sources are: a) the Permanent Household Survey (EPH) by the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INDEC),<sup>2</sup> which, while not focused exclusively on religious matters, provides data on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the population, including variables related to religion; b) the National Survey on Religious Beliefs and Attitudes (ENCARE),<sup>3</sup> designed to study religious beliefs and practices in Argentina, conducted in 2008 and 2019. Additionally, there is: (a) the Latinobarómetro,<sup>4</sup> which, although intended for all countries in the Americas, includes specific data for Argentina, and (b) surveys conducted by the ODSA (Observatory of Social Debt Argentina)<sup>5</sup> at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina (UCA), which have included questions related to religiosity in their studies.

Other antecedents of research on the interactions between religion, society and human behavior, within the framework of the Social Sciences in Argentina, can be found in studies by scholars who are or were affiliated to the UCA (Grizzuti 2021): Aldo Büntig (1969), Jorge Soneira (1996), Alejandro Frigerio (1994), María Julia Carozzi (1991; 2006), Eloísa Martín (2007), Nicolás Viotti (2011), Ana Lourdes Suárez (2016, 2019), López Fianza and Juan Martín (2015).

While the 1947 census showed that 9 out of 10 people identified themselves as Catholics, a study conducted by the University of Quilmes (Argentina) in 2021 determined that the percentage of those who identify themselves as Catholics is 77%. Data on religiosity in Argentina were observed again in 2008 (Mallimaci) and Otros, 2008, where it was concluded that 9 out of 10 inhabitants of Argentina believe in God, with 77% identifying themselves as Catholics, 9% as Evangelicals, and 11% as indifferent (i.e., atheists, agnostics, or non-religious).

For its part, the ODSA (Observatorio de la Deuda Social Argentina UCA 2019) of the UCA incorporated questions about religiosity and beliefs of the Argentine population into its regular surveys in 2011, 2013, and 2018. In all three surveys, 9 out of 10 Argentines claim to believe in God.<sup>6</sup> However, the number of Catholics fluctuates between 74.2% in 2011 and 72.8% in 2018, while Evangelicals show a slight increase from 10.1% in 2011 to 13.2% in 2018, and the number of atheists or non-religious individuals decreases from 14.5% in 2011 to 13% in 2018.

2019 data on religiosity in the Argentine population shows that the proportion of Catholics decreased to 63%, with young people identifying as Catholic dropping

to 52.5%, compared to data from a decade earlier, where the Catholic population was 76.5% (Mallimaci et al. 2019).

According to a study by ODSA-UCA, religiosity has not decreased, but rather, what has declined is adherence to a specific religious institution (Suárez and López Fianza 2020; Suárez & Olszanowski 2021). Belief in God remains widespread, with 8 to 9 out of 10 people claiming to believe in God. The report analyzes the relationship and distinction between belief, self-identification with religion, and behavior, including participation in services, private devotion, or religious community activity (Suárez and López Fianza 2020).

Now, what about Argentine youth? Among the most recent studies relevant to our research is ‘Jóvenes, actitudes y creencias religiosas en Argentina (2019)’ (Fernández 2019), which descriptively addresses the topic of religiosity through an analysis of the data from the second national survey on attitudes and religious beliefs conducted by the Society, Culture, and Religion Program of CEIL-CONICET in 2019. Additionally, there is a study that examines the correlation between religiosity, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction among youth (Oñate; Mesurado; Rodriguez; Moreno 2018). However, this study focuses on a specific population within a given geographic region, rather than representing the entire country.

### **1.3. Argentina and a dissolving legislation**

The youth considered in this study grew up within a legal framework in Argentina that, since 2010, has altered the direction of issues related to the understanding of the value of life, family, and the person. The legal framework includes the 2010 Law 26.618 on Equal Marriage or civil unions between people of the same sex, the 2012 Law 26.743 on Gender Identity, and the 2020 Law 27.610 on Voluntary and Legal Abortion.

With the first of these laws, the foundation of the social structure is deconstructed, as ‘the procreative purpose is what gives marriage its social dimension, and therefore its institutional and legal character’ (Spanish Episcopal Conference, 24 June 1994, cited in Perriaux 2010, 47–48). Denying sexual complementarity as a requirement for the generation of life can lead to the instrumentalization of the body through assisted reproduction techniques, surrogacy, or embryo cryopreservation. With the second law, the original and inescapable sexual difference established at the moment of fertilization in every human being is denied. To legislate based on this denial of natural and biological evidence, one must proceed to an absolutization of the idea of freedom above other rights. The limitation of the gender perspective lies precisely in denying the relationship between human sexuality and the man-woman pairing. In fact, by rejecting this biological differentiation, an unlimited creativity of freedom is upheld, which transforms the body into something to be used at will (Malo 2020). Finally, with the enactment of the third law, regarding voluntary abortion, the origin of life is subordinated to personal desire, creating discrimination between unborn persons and fostering eugenics.

It is important to recall this legal framework because it can explain certain valuations of young people regarding issues related to sexuality that were explored in the survey

and focus group. During their childhood and adolescence, these topics were on the agenda from different angles: from educational policies promoting these laws, from the media's widespread support for those advocating the new legislation, and through the repeated ideological street confrontations surrounding the sanctioning of laws that seemed to divide the country into 'green handkerchiefs' (supporters of the new laws) and 'blue handkerchiefs' (supporters of life). It is also noteworthy that the 'blue handkerchief' movement, as a pro-life promoter and defender, gained significant international strength and recognition in Latin America, giving rise to similar pro-life groups, especially in 2018. This is the phenomenon known as the 'blue wave'. Additionally, in 2015, the '#NiUnaMenos' movement began in Argentina, stemming from the plea of a mother whose 14-year-old daughter, pregnant, had been murdered by her boyfriend. The mother demanded justice for her daughter and grandchild. Interestingly, this movement later evolved globally to defend abortion, rather than its original purpose of defending women and life. As Verónica Camargo, the mother of the victims, stated: 'In 2016, #NiUnaMenos was taken over by another group of women. In the Congress march, the abortion issue was mixed in, which I did not agree with. (...) #NiUnaMenos was for everyone. It was not sectorial, it was not political, it was not religious' (Nöllmann 2023).

## 2. Characteristics of Argentine youth

The data obtained from the survey conducted with young people (Footprints 2023) align with the findings of statistical studies in Argentina (2022 Census, INDEC 2024a) regarding the proportion of men and women. Additionally, 43% have completed their primary and secondary education, while 51% have pursued or are currently pursuing tertiary or university studies. However, the level of advanced education is low, with only 3% having a master's degree and 2% holding a doctorate. In the labor market, 35% work in the private sector, 15% in the public sector, and 11% are self-employed or work as freelancers. Only 6% report being unemployed, while 25% are exclusively focused on their studies. This demographic and educational profile reflects the social and economic characteristics of Argentine youth, a key sector for both social and economic development (Figure 1).

Regarding marital status, 56% of young people are single, and 30% are in a relationship. Among those who are single or in a relationship, 67% express a desire to marry in a religious ceremony in the future, reflecting the continued importance of religious marriage in their expectations. Finally, in terms of living arrangements, 38% live with their parents, 27% live with their partner and children, 14% live alone, and 4% live with friends. This indicates diverse family and living configurations within the Argentine youth population (Figure 2).

### 2.1. What do young people believe in? What is their religious affiliation?

In terms of beliefs, 51% of young people identify as believers in God, with women being predominantly more religious (56%) compared to men (44%). Among the older age group, those between 24 and 29 years old (60%) are the most likely to identify as believers. On the other hand, among those who express indifference (8.4%) or agnosticism (14.1%) regarding the existence of God, men are the majority, representing 67% of the indifferent and 59% of the agnostics. These figures

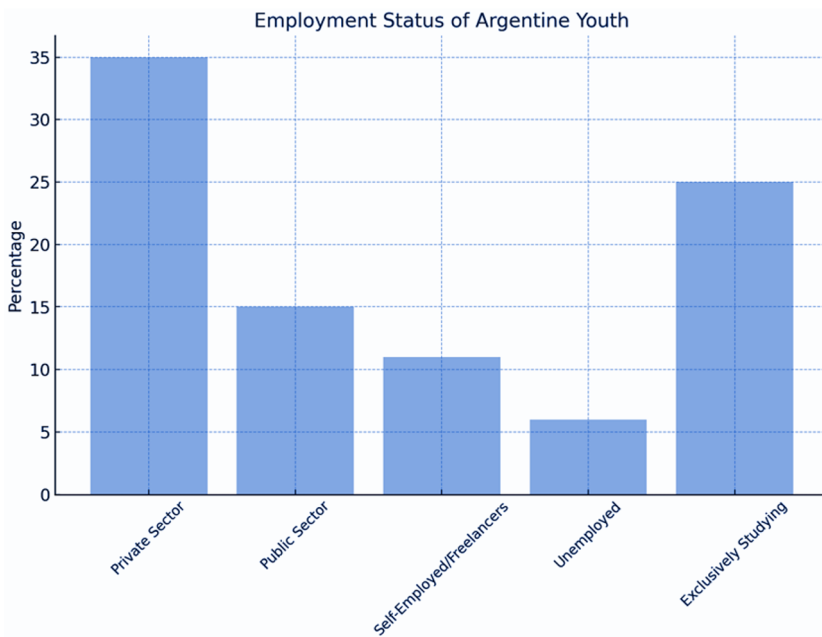


Figure 1. Employment status of Argentine youth.

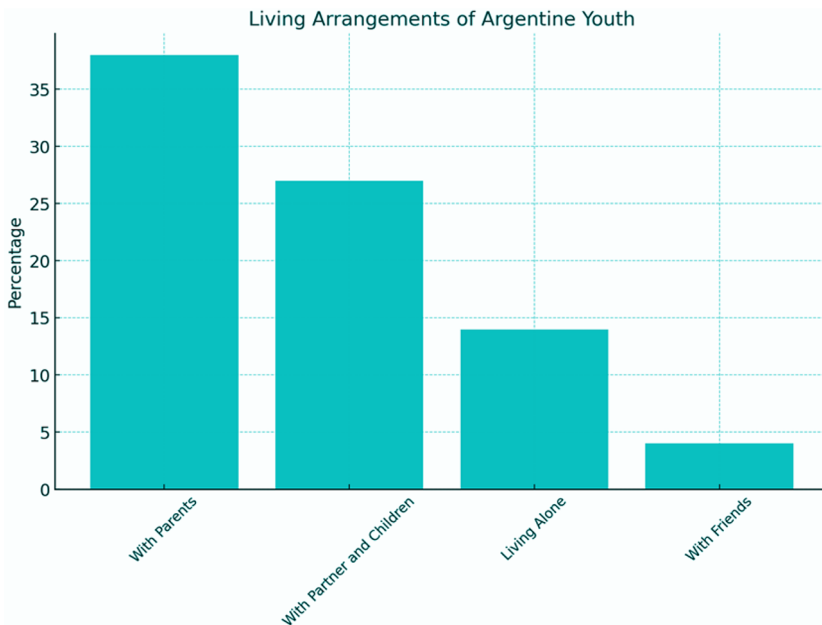


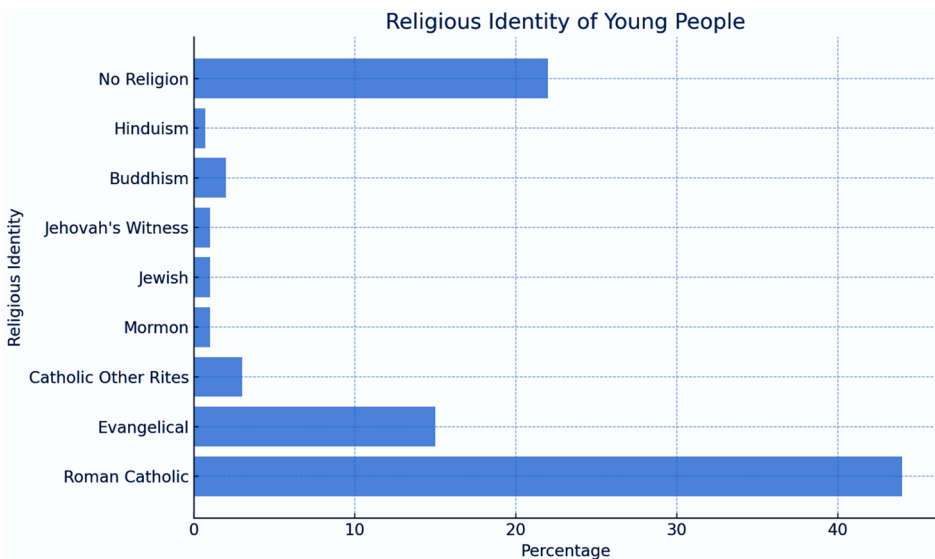
Figure 2. Living arrangements of Argentine youth.

reflect a higher level of religious skepticism among young men, in contrast with young women, who tend to maintain stronger adherence to belief in God and religion. The 13% of young people who state they are searching for belief are mostly men.

Regarding religious identity, 46% of young people identify with the Roman Catholic Church (44%) and Catholicism of other rites (2%), with men being the majority (51%) compared to women (49%). 15% adhere to the Evangelical religion. Although Catholicism remains the predominant denomination, the decrease in the percentage of Catholics compared to previous studies reveals an increasing pluralism in the religious life of young people. In addition to Catholics of other rites (2%) and minority groups such as Mormons (1%), Jews (1%), and Jehovah's Witnesses (1%), there is also a presence of non-Abrahamic spiritualities such as Buddhism (2%, predominantly among women) and Hinduism (0.7%), suggesting a certain degree of openness to other spiritual currents—still marginal in quantitative terms—that are non-traditional in Argentina. A relevant finding is that 22% of young people report not identifying with any religion. Among those who do not identify with the proposed religions, unique responses emerge, such as 'law of attraction', 'Satanism', 'Umbanda', 'Odalism', 'I'm a Mason', or 'Taoism'. These responses point to a fragmentation in religious identity, as well as the adoption of alternative beliefs or practices, some of which are esoteric or syncretic in nature (Figure 3).

The fact that 78% of young people identify with a religion, while only 51% consider themselves believers, suggests a significant difference between religious affiliation and the active practice of faith. The high rate of religious identification (78%) may reflect adherence to religion as part of cultural or family identity, rather than an active practice or personal belief. Religion may be an important part of the cultural and social context in which young people have grown up, but this does not necessarily translate into belief. It is also possible that many young people continue to identify with a religion due to tradition or family influence, but have distanced themselves from religious life.

This phenomenon can also be interpreted through the concept of secularization and the personalization of religion. According to sociologist José Casanova,



**Figure 3.** Religious affiliation of Argentine youth.

secularization does not necessarily mean the disappearance of religion, but rather a transformation in its social role and how people relate to it (Casanova 2006). Young people may still identify with a religion for cultural or social reasons but adopt a more personalized and less institutionalized view of faith. This reference provides evidence for understanding how religion can remain a significant part of cultural identity, even when personal practice and belief are less prevalent.

When asking young people in the focus group about their beliefs and spiritual life, both believers and non-believers agree that spirituality ‘is something intimate and personal’, something that is cultivated and reflected in daily life. For some, it ‘is a path of inner growth’ (believers), while for others, it is related to the search for meaning beyond the material or religious (non-believers). Believers associate it with their relationship with God, while non-believers see it as a broader connection with the universe or their inner self.

Believers highlight that transcendence and spirituality are integral to their daily lives, shaping their relationships and search for meaning: ‘Spirituality is where we seek a deeper purpose, whether through external experiences or self-reflection. It invites us to explore our place in the world and what truly moves us, offering meaning beyond the everyday’.

Both believers and non-believers agree that the social environment significantly shapes their approach to spirituality. While they find it easy to conform and drift away from religion under the influence of friends and family, believers strive to uphold their faith in a secularized society.

It’s easy to lose spirituality in today’s environment, especially when most people around me, including friends and family, are not deeply religious. While I may adapt and lose sight of my beliefs at times, I strive to reconnect and live according to what God asks of me, showing my spirituality both for myself and others, particularly in a context where it’s less visible among young people.

## **2.2. Spiritual growth**

The fact that 37% consider their faith life more relevant now than five years ago suggests a resurgence or reaffirmation of religiosity for a significant proportion of young people. This increase could be interpreted as a reaction to the socio-cultural or economic uncertainties the country has faced, compounded by the pandemic, or as a sign of the search for deeper spiritual meaning in contemporary life.

Focus group participants, both believers and non-believers, agreed that the isolation and hardships of the pandemic prompted them to seek meaning in transcendence and find peace in the idea of an afterlife. Confronting life’s limits during this time led many to appreciate a personal spiritual intimacy they had not previously valued:

Compared to five years ago, I feel my spirituality has strengthened, even though I haven’t made huge strides. During difficult times, especially during lockdown, a transcendent view helped me maintain peace and harmony, particularly in family moments like sharing meals. My spirituality has grown and gained new dimensions since 2019.

### **2.3. Religiosity and ethical behavior**

Most respondents (60% strongly agree or somewhat agree) concur that ‘it is not necessary to believe in God to be a good person and have good values.’ This consensus grows to 80% when including those who generally agree. This finding highlights a prevalent perspective among young people that morality and ethical values can exist independently of religious beliefs.

59% of young people strongly agree or somewhat agree that individual conscience is the main guide for determining what is right and wrong, surpassing external or objective norms. Including those who generally agree, the percentage rises to 82%. This supports the notion that, for many, morality is perceived as a personal framework rather than adherence to established religious principles. Notably, this percentage predominantly includes young individuals aged 24 to 29.

Only 29% of young people share the perception that religious individuals forgive more easily than non-religious ones. Similarly, just 30% believe that religious beliefs significantly influence daily decisions, emphasizing the disconnect between faith and ethical behavior.

Despite the general disconnect between religiosity and ethical behavior, there are areas where religion continues to hold significant influence. Among young people, 49% strongly or somewhat agree with praying to God for their family and friends, a percentage that increases to 69% when including those who generally agree. Furthermore, 71% believe that religious affiliation can help better cope with life’s challenges (Figure 4).

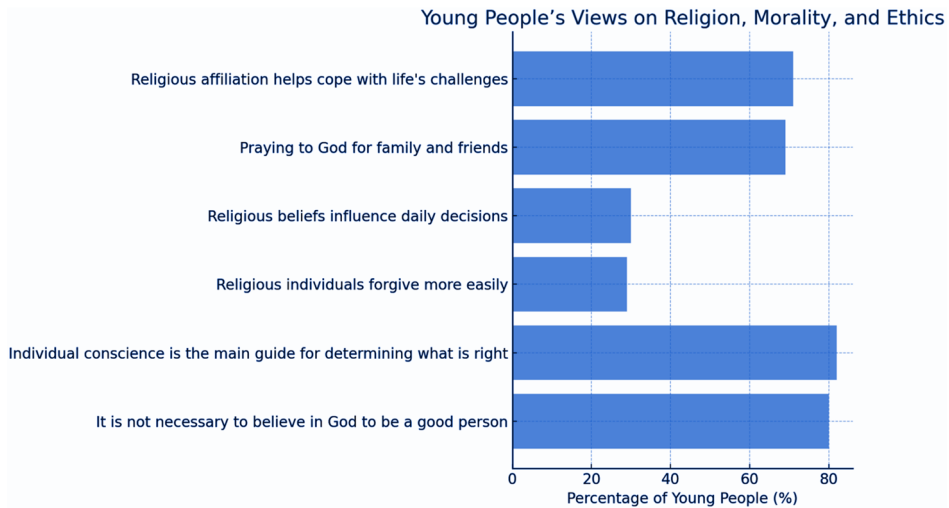
### **2.4. Faith, freedom, and guilt**

To delve deeper into the events that distanced them from faith and religious education, the young people in the focus group were asked about the reasons for their distance from the Church or the religious beliefs and values learned in early childhood. Believers generally express gratitude for the faith education they received from their parents, but note that the faith taught in childhood has evolved over time. Most acknowledge transitioning from a more obedient faith to a more personal and reflective one:

In the past, I felt that believing in God was something I had to do because that’s what I was taught. Now, I feel that my relationship with faith depends on what I choose to believe. I value what I learned from my parents, but now it’s something more intimate and less imposed. It’s as if faith is no longer just about following rules but a way to seek answers that make sense to me.

Some of the young people in the focus group, who currently identify as non-believers, mention that the rigid upbringing, in which the idea of imposed guilt was instilled, distanced them from faith and created an internal conflict that clashed with some of their parents’ beliefs:

I think what weighs the most, at least in my circle—where all my friends are also ex-Catholics or call themselves ‘rehabilitated Catholics’—is the concept of ‘Christian guilt.’ The Church, in some way, works from an early age to make certain things generate guilt. Even today, there are situations that provoke that feeling in me without knowing exactly why, until I realize it’s the guilt instilled from childhood.



**Figure 4.** Young people's views on religion, morality and ethics.

Other statements related to instilling a rigid education state the following:

It bothers me how the Church justifies guilt with simplistic explanations, like telling you something 'should' make you feel bad. When asked why, they say, "God created you this way, but it's your cross to carry with joy." This creates a contradiction: how can I be myself if my cross is not being able to be who I truly am? In my experience, this idea of guilt is what pushes people away the most.

Guilt is a recurring theme in the opinions of believers and non-believers, and both groups criticize how religious education fosters the feeling of guilt for not following certain principles:

I consider myself Catholic, as I was raised in that doctrine, although I am now a bit more distant from religion. What I find difficult about the Church is the insistence on guilt and repentance. Obviously, I reflect on my actions and try to correct my mistakes, but what I struggle with the most is the spiritual process of self-examination or confession. For me, it's more natural to recognize my mistakes, correct what needs to change, and move forward without carrying excessive guilt.

Believers tend to reinterpret guilt as an opportunity for healing and improving their relationship with God. 'In fact, this is something I discovered through my personal experience. My spirituality evolved when I stopped seeing 'asking for forgiveness' as an obligation because something was wrong, and started seeing it as an act of healing.'

One of the believers, a young teacher, criticizes the reductive view of Christian morality and emphasizes the need to educate in love:

Morality, which is only one part of Christian life, should not be based solely on what is allowed or forbidden, as if we were following the rules of a game like Monopoly, where breaking the rules is cheating. Instead, it should arise from the understanding that my relationship is with a person, a God who is three persons, and who reveals Himself as love.

For some of the young people in the focus group, adolescence was a period of distancing from faith: 'I think what pushed me away from the Church the most during adolescence was the lack of discussion on sexuality and the way it was presented as something wrong'. For others, it was a time of reaffirming their beliefs, especially after overcoming personal crises:

I decided to keep believing in the Church despite its mistakes and challenges because my faith in Christianity goes beyond judging what's right or wrong. I don't want to distance myself from God. It's us who must seek to draw closer to Him.

## **2.5. Values associated with religiosity**

The analysis of data on the attributes associated with religion reveals a significant perspective for social peace. The high identification of religion with solidarity (82%) and forgiveness (83%) highlights the predominant perception of religion as a source of values that promote mutual aid and reconciliation. These attributes reflect a view of religion as a system that fosters prosocial behaviors and strengthens social cohesion through empathy and understanding.

The association of religion with kindness (77%) and willingness to commit (73%) further underscores its role in promoting positive attitudes and engagement in the well-being of others. Humility (73%) as the next attribute reinforces the idea that religion not only guides behavior towards others, but also promotes modest self-assessment and an awareness of one's relationship with the community and the social environment.

However, the lower degree of association between religion and detachment from material goods (49%) and the sense of justice (57%) indicates a discrepancy in how these aspects are perceived within the religious framework. In comparison with the global data from the survey applied to youth in eight countries that are part of this study, where the sense of justice is widely recognized (75%), the lesser emphasis placed by Argentine youth on justice as an attribute associated with religion suggests a perception of religion that is more focused on immediate interpersonal values and less on abstract or structural principles of social justice (Figure 5). This finding may reflect a tendency to prioritize practical and relational values over more idealistic or ethical principles.

When asked about the image of the Church and the attributes associated with it, both believing and non-believing youth expressed relatively consistent views, aligning with survey data. They acknowledged the Church's social work, particularly in vulnerable communities:

Even though I'm not Catholic, I value the Church's efforts in organizing activities with young people from low-income neighborhoods. Many face tough situations like family violence, drugs, or depression, and the Church offers support, guidance, and shows that other paths are possible. Regardless of one's beliefs, this kind of service is very valuable.

The negative image stems from a disconnection with youth concerns, rigidity on sexuality, and inconsistency between preaching and practice:

I recognize that Catholic doctrine transmitted to me very important values, such as solidarity, service, and friendship. In fact, I study medicine because of that training. But when it is about the Church as an institution, something that I consider a 'countervalue' is hypocrisy. I see many people who say they are very Catholic, who attend mass, but do not live the values they preach.

## 2.6. A God who is love

The analysis of the perception of the image of God reveals a predominance of positive and transcendent conceptions. The identification of God as 'a great mystery' (72%), 'a merciful, loving, and indulgent being' (68%), and 'the origin of the entire universe' (62%) shows that, for the majority, the divine figure is associated with positive attributes reflecting a benevolent vision of divinity.

The image of God as Love and Mercy is attributed by 73% of women and 63% of men, while the image of God as a great mystery is attributed equally by 72% of both men and women. The perception of God as the origin of the entire universe is attributed by 65% of women and 59% of men.

The more negative images of God, such as 'a controlling judge' (28%) or a being who 'rewards and punishes' (46%), are less prevalent among young people. The lower association with these punitive and watchful views of God suggests a widespread preference for a more compassionate and merciful conception of the divine. This trend indicates a relationship with the sacred that is not marked by harsh judgment, but by understanding, love, and assistance.

Among women, only 25% attribute to God the image of a controlling judge, while 31% of men do. A total of 46% of both men and women see God as a being who rewards and punishes. The idea of God as a universal watcher is more prevalent among men (53%), with only 45% of women considering Him in this way.

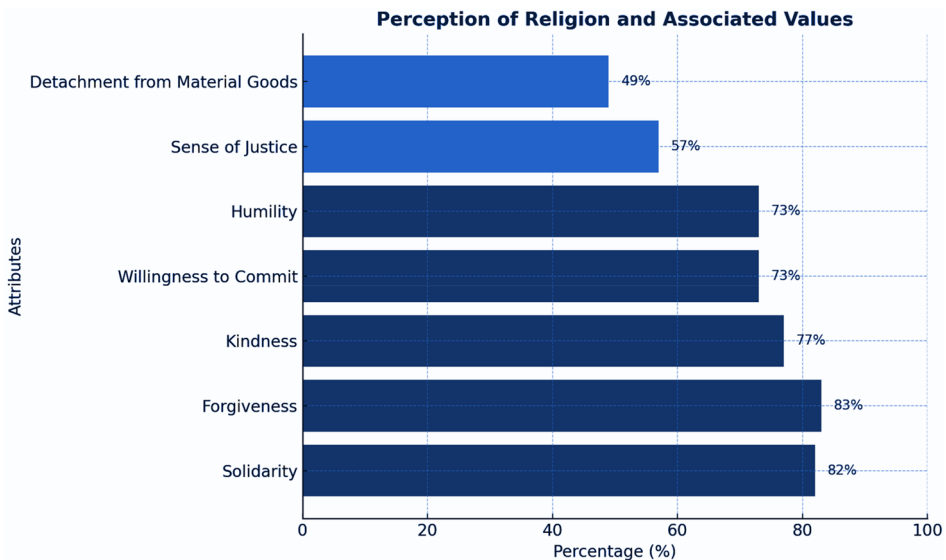
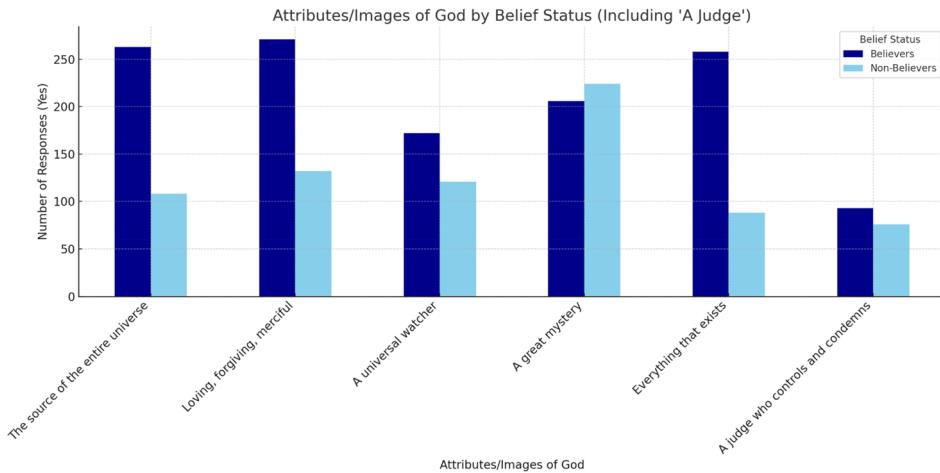


Figure 5. Values associated with religiosity among Argentine youth.



**Figure 6.** Images of God identified by Argentine youth.

A particularly interesting finding is that the perception of God as a ‘watcher’ and as a being who ‘observes and supervises’ predominates among believers (53%). This difference may suggest that divine surveillance is seen as an important characteristic for those with an active faith, as the presence of God as an observer can influence their moral and spiritual life. On the other hand, for non-believers, the image of a vigilant God may be of lesser relevance, possibly indicating a reduced concern for morality in religious terms and a more secular perspective on ethics for behavior (Figure 6).

## **2.7. Young people on agenda issues and sexual morality**

When asked about agenda issues and sexual morality, that is, those problems or matters that, due to their relevance, receive significant and ongoing attention in the public and political spheres, Argentine youths show a strong commitment to the need for political integrity and transparency, a relativistic attitude towards sexuality, a strong critique of pornography, a high environmental awareness, and a respect for freedom of conscience.

### **a) political corruption**

The analysis of Argentine youth’s perceptions regarding social issues and moral problems reveals a series of distinctive positions when compared to their international counterparts. Ninety-three percent of young Argentini-ans agree that political corruption is one of the most serious social ailments today. This high percentage reflects a significant concern for integrity and transparency in the political sphere, and may be linked to a local social and political context that underscores the need for reforms and efforts to combat corruption.

For the young people in the focus group, political corruption is a major issue they must face, and it discourages them from civic participation.

**b) sexuality**

Seventy-three percent of young people affirm that there is no right or wrong way to experience sexuality. These results can be interpreted as a manifestation of cultural changes in attitudes toward sexuality, encouraged in part by the aforementioned legislation.

When breaking down these data by gender, significant differences emerge that warrant further reflection. While 79% of the women surveyed agree with this statement, only 67% of men share this view. Women, by showing a higher level of agreement with the idea that there is no right or wrong way to experience sexuality, may be expressing greater acceptance of sexual diversity and a certain alignment with feminist discourses that emphasize ‘women’s sexual liberation.’

The young people in the focus group responded that they consider sexuality to be a deeply personal and intimate matter. Many emphasized that it should not be categorized in terms of ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ as each individual experiences their sexuality according to their own understanding and experiences. They stressed the importance of mutual respect and consent in relationships, highlighting that the key is to live it authentically and responsibly, without external judgment about what is acceptable or not. One participant shared: ‘I believe it is something very personal and intimate, and therefore always a personal matter, as long as you do it with respect for the other and with the other person’s consent.’

Another participant, who received Catholic schooling, added:

Sexuality cannot simply be categorized as ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect,’ since it is not always a matter of conscious choice. In this context, classifying sexuality in terms of absolute morality is unproductive, as people do not always have control over their sexual orientation or identity.

Believers argue that Christian morality should not be reduced to a set of rules about what is allowed or forbidden, but should focus on love and the pursuit of the other. They criticize a legalistic view of religion, where actions are judged based on their external correctness, and propose a deeper perspective centered on love for God and others.

**c) pornography**

Pornography is often regarded as a harmful influence that can foster unrealistic expectations and diminish sensitivity toward genuine intimacy and mutual respect. A significant portion of young people (56%) believe that pornography harms intimate relationships, thus maintaining a critical stance toward its consumption and advocating for the importance of a respectful sexuality that does not degrade individuals. Fifty-nine percent of women and 58% of men agree with this view.

**d) use of contraceptives**

The fact that only 24% of Argentine youth believe that contraceptive use affects the quality of intimacy in romantic relationships suggests a relatively low perception of the negative effects of contraceptives. This contrasts with 40% of young people from other countries participating in this global study, who consider that contraceptives

negatively impact relationships. The lower concern among Argentine youth may reflect a greater acceptance of contraceptives as a normalized tool in romantic relationships. This difference could be influenced by specific cultural and social contexts. In Argentina, it might be attributed to public policies on standardized sexual education and the availability of free reproductive health services, where contraceptives are provided at no cost and promoted through national educational programs.

When these data are broken down by gender, the differences between women and men are significant. Only 18% of women agree or strongly agree with the idea that contraceptives negatively affect intimacy, compared to 30% of men. This gap could reflect greater acceptance of reproductive control and female autonomy among women. Meanwhile, men tend to perceive contraceptives as an element that alters the comprehensive meaning of intimacy, potentially reflecting different expectations or experiences regarding sexuality and reproductive control in romantic relationships.

#### ***e) environment***

Environmental issues are considered a major challenge by 86% of young Argentines, reflecting a growing awareness of issues such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. This consensus is likely to be influenced by environmental education, social movements, and the increasing visibility of these issues in the media. Women exhibit greater environmental awareness, with 91% of women compared to 80% of men agreeing or strongly agreeing that environmental issues are pressing for the global population.

This difference may stem from women's roles as caregivers and mothers, which often involve activities that promote the protection of the home and surroundings, potentially extending to greater sensitivity toward environmental problems. Social psychology has also highlighted that women tend to have a stronger orientation toward care and the preservation of resources, aligning with values such as environmental conservation and the well-being of future generations (Sánchez 2024).

The high level of environmental awareness among Argentine youth aligns with the Church's call for ecological responsibility and care for creation (as emphasized in *Laudato Si*, *Laudate Deum*, and *Fratelli Tutti*). Young people who grasp the urgency of environmental issues are more likely to support public policies and sustainable business practices, potentially contributing to positive ecological solutions at both national and international levels in the present and future.

#### ***d) conscientious objection***

Seventy percent of young people (64% of women and 76% of men) agree that doctors should be allowed to refuse to perform abortions or assisted suicides on grounds of conscience without facing discrimination in their professional or social environments. This figure reflects a significant appreciation for freedom of conscience and moral autonomy within the professional sphere. Such support can be interpreted as an indicator that, among young people, there is an ethical sensibility that

prioritizes individual rights over other types of rights. This stance aligns with the majority view that ‘each person’s conscience determines what is right and what is wrong’ (82%).

This finding may also be linked to the growing demand for human rights policies and individual freedoms in contemporary societies. In a context that fosters plurality and tolerance for diverse ways of thinking, conscientious objection emerges as an individual right that must be protected to ensure personal freedom in professional settings.

## **2.8. International agenda issues**

When young people are confronted with certain current and controversial issues, a sometimes contradictory perspective emerges regarding the values and principles that shape their understanding of justice, ethics, and legality.

### ***a) death penalty for serious crimes***

Sixty-five percent of young people support the death penalty for serious crimes, reflecting a punitive stance toward severe criminality. This support is higher among women (69%) than men (60%). In Argentina, this high approval may stem from concerns about insecurity and perceptions of impunity in violent crimes, signaling a desire for decisive solutions in response to an ineffective judicial system.

### ***b) position on war***

Sixty-one percent of young people who assert that war is never justifiable reflects a widespread rejection of armed conflict as a means of resolving disputes, in line with a pacifist and humanitarian approach. This stance appears to align with an ethical perspective that prioritizes dialogue and peaceful solutions, highlighting the trend among newer generations towards non-violence and conflict resolution through diplomatic means. Women (64%) show slightly more rejection of war than men (58%).

### ***c) support for surrogacy***

Sixty-six percent of Argentine youth support surrogacy, reflecting significant acceptance of this practice as a valid option in assisted reproduction and an expression of flexibility regarding reproductive rights. Women show higher support (72%) compared to men (58%), a gap possibly explained by women’s closer connection to reproductive issues, while men may feel more emotionally distant from biological processes.

### ***d) legalization of prostitution***

The low support for the legalization of prostitution (27%) contrasts with the more favorable view of surrogacy, indicating that while Argentine youth are open to bodily commercialization in reproductive contexts, they are more cautious about sexual commerce. Prostitution is viewed negatively due to its association with exploitation,

human trafficking, and dignity violations. While surrogacy is seen as empowering and a solution to infertility, prostitution is linked to vulnerability and exploitation. There is also a gender gap: 23% of women support legalization compared to 33% of men. Women may view prostitution as a form of subordination, while men, less exposed to its risks, might see it as a private matter between consenting adults.

## **2.9. Why young people stop believing**

The majority of the young people surveyed indicated that they stopped believing between the ages of 14 and 19. The main reason cited was the negative perception of the behavior of certain believers, which led them to conclude that ‘religion doesn’t help people become better’. This suggests that interpersonal experiences influence attitudes toward faith, especially when inconsistencies between religious beliefs and moral behavior are perceived. The second reason was the idea that ‘God is a psychological refuge’, reflecting a rationalist view of religion as a human construct. Additionally, some young people rejected religious institutions but maintained their belief in God, while others leaned toward more abstract or humanist forms of spirituality, signaling a growing trend to disconnect spirituality from traditional religious structures (Suárez and López Fianza 2020).

It is interesting to note that 62% of young atheists or agnostics believe that ‘you don’t need God to be a good person’, reflecting a secular ethic focused on moral autonomy. Regarding life after death, 48% believe in some form of existence beyond death, showing an ambivalence between the rejection of religious doctrines and the acceptance of the possibility of transcendence. Furthermore, 70% of those surveyed admit to having prayed in extreme situations, indicating that, despite rejecting religion, they turn to religious practices in times of crisis, revealing the persistence of cultural habits in times of desperation and distress.

## **2.10. Those who believe in God**

Young people practice their faith, particularly focusing on their relationship with God through personal prayer. A clear preference for solitary practice is observed, suggesting a greater inclination towards personal spirituality, though there is still an appreciation for communal expressions of faith.

### ***a) how do they pray?***

Fifty-one percent of believing young people have a strong connection to prayer, mainly viewing it as a form of communication with the transcendent. Ninety-eight percent agree that ‘praying means conversing with God’, highlighting a personal and intimate relationship with the divine. Fifty-eight percent associate prayer with ‘dialogue with oneself through meditation’, suggesting an introspective aspect. Only 20% view prayer as ‘an illusory comfort’, indicating that most find it meaningful. Regarding preferences, 87% prefer to pray alone, reflecting a tendency toward personal spirituality, though 55% also value communal prayer. Compared to global trends, young Argentinians favor personal prayer more.

**b) how often do they pray?**

When examining the frequency of prayer, 17% of young people pray several times a day, 31% once a day, 21% weekly, 18% several times a month, and 12% several times a year. In contrast, participation in religious services is less frequent: only 10% attend daily Mass, 23% attend weekly, and 21% attend on special occasions. Additionally, 23% have stopped attending religious services, suggesting a trend toward distancing themselves from institutionalized religion.

**c) who do they invoke?**

The data on who young people direct their prayers to reveal a clear preference for addressing God, with 91% of respondents naming Him as the main recipient. This finding emphasizes the centrality of a supreme divine figure in youth spirituality, which remains monotheistic and personalistic. It is also noteworthy that 52% mention Jesus Christ, suggesting a significant identification with the central redemptive figure of Christianity. Additionally, 38% invoke the Holy Spirit in their prayers, and 30% address the Virgin Mary.

On the other hand, 13% of respondents claim to pray to themselves, which could be interpreted as a practice of introspection or spiritual self-affirmation, where prayer becomes an internal dialogue. The 4% of respondents who pray to 'the gods' and another 4% who address nature indicate the presence of syncretic beliefs among some young people. The mention of the universe (13%) and the deceased (10%) highlights other forms of spiritual connection, where the cosmic and ancestral dimensions play a symbolic role.

**d) what means do they use to pray?**

More than half (51%) of young people prefer to pray using their own words, reflecting a personal approach to spirituality that values spontaneity and authenticity. 34% prefer silence and contemplation in a quiet space. While personalization is prominent, 25% report praying traditional prayers, indicating that established ways remain meaningful to many. Other practices include biblical meditation (20%), listening to spiritual music (15%), and less common methods such as immersing yourself in nature (6%), praying before the Eucharist (6%), or reading spiritual texts (6%). Only 5% look for inspiration for prayer on the Internet.

These patterns align with global trends, where personal prayer (55%) and silent contemplation (34%) are also prevalent, demonstrating a shift toward personal and meditative religious practices.

**2.11. The Church and young believers**

The data reveal a predominantly positive perception of the Church among most Argentine youth who identify as believers. The fact that 64% consider it a 'divine and human institution' and 68% see it as 'a human community that does good' highlights a favorable view of its spiritual and social roles. These responses suggest that, for the majority of young people, the Church remains an important institution.

However, 31% consider the Church to be 'an ancient and backward entity', 30% view it as 'a political power entity', and 27% see it as 'a source of unnecessary

obligations and rules.’ This last percentage suggests that a portion of young people perceive the Church as a normative structure, which may be related to the growing emphasis on individual freedom and the rejection of institutions that impose restrictions based on authority.

### **2.12. Catholics and the doctrine of faith**

Fifty-three percent strongly (35%) or somewhat (18%) agree that ‘the Bible is a sacred text containing truths revealed by God’; 51% agree that ‘God revealed Himself through His Son Jesus Christ’, and 38% believe that ‘the Bible contains human wisdom but not divine revelation’.

Sixty-seven percent of young people believe that ‘anyone can read the Scriptures on their own, without the Church’s mediation’, while 17% rely on Church tradition and the Magisterium for proper interpretation, and 16% have not considered the question.

In Catholic doctrine, 76% affirm belief in Jesus Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, 72% associate baptism with becoming children of God, and 70% link Confirmation to greater Christian responsibility. Sixty-seven percent view the sacraments as visible signs of God’s life, while 59% agree that Jesus instituted the seven sacraments.

Regarding Confession, 67% consider it essential for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Although 76% feel attending Mass is unnecessary to be a good Christian, 38% view the Eucharist as central to their lives. On marriage, 50% see it as lifelong support for spouses, while 55% believe it adds nothing to love between partners.

These findings highlight a strong connection with the Word of God among Catholic youth but indicate a need for a deeper understanding of Scripture and sacraments in harmony with the Church.

### **2.13. Appreciations on the ecclesial community and sacramental life**

The survey sought to explore the characteristics that young people consider essential for an ecclesial community to be perceived as authentic. The majority of respondents (61%) emphasized charity as the primary distinguishing feature, describing an authentic community as one that ‘serves those most in need’. Forty-seven percent of participants agreed that authenticity is found in ‘close friendships through which people get to know and help each other’. To a lesser extent, 42% stated that authenticity depends on ‘the vitality and quality of activities for all ages’. Finally, 37% affirmed that authenticity is related to ‘fidelity to the Church’s Magisterium: that priests and catechists teach the doctrine of the Church’. This analysis reveals a general tendency to value ‘institutional aspects’ less, preferring spontaneous relationships centered on charity and solidarity. The open-ended question also yielded responses highlighting that authenticity is manifested in ‘the intensity of faith’, ‘the transparency with which the faithful present themselves to others’, and ‘human warmth’.

### **2.14. Exploring faith practice**

When investigating the practice of their faith, the majority of young people in this subgroup who have stopped attending Mass state that they don’t believe it is

necessary to encounter God there, or that it feels like a formality lacking authenticity and spontaneity. A few also mentioned that they stopped going because others their age had done the same. One person specified that ‘they got lazy’, while others cited ‘lack of time due to studying and working’ or simply stated, ‘I stopped but hope to return.’

Regarding whether anyone has ever explained clearly and fully what happens during Mass, 50% report that their parents explained it, 54% say it was their catechists, and 20% mention a priest or religious figure. Friends hardly play a role (5%), and 13% say no one has explained it to them. When comparing these responses to those of young people in general (from the eight countries involved in the study), a notable difference emerges: globally, 63% reported receiving such explanations from their parents.

Regarding the sacrament of reconciliation, 32% of Catholic youth recognize its importance but find it uncomfortable and embarrassing to attend. Twenty-eight percent would like to go more often, while 16% consider it fundamental, and 13% don’t find it necessary. Eleven percent used to go to confession but have stopped. (Figure 7)

Regarding the reasons why they stopped going to confession, the majority believe that they can ask ‘forgiveness from God directly’. A smaller proportion agrees that they do not recognize the authority of the Church, as it is not written anywhere in the Gospel that one must kneel before a priest to ask for God’s forgiveness. A few individuals mention having had negative experiences in the confessional or feeling embarrassed to discuss their sins with a priest. As this question allowed for open-ended responses, some young people said: ‘I don’t believe in the Church’, ‘I don’t make time for it’, ‘I no longer participate in a religious community’, ‘The expression of sin is a personal act with God, without intermediaries’, and ‘I will go at another time.’

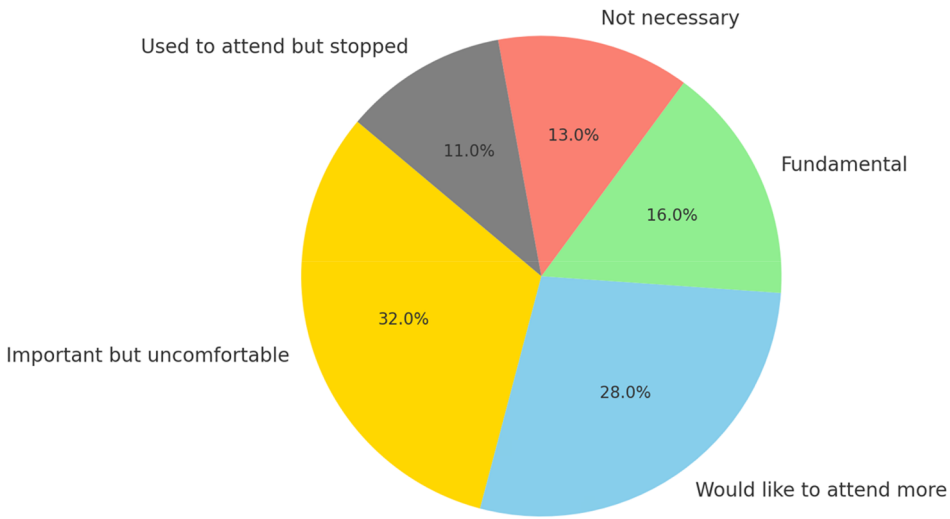
### ***2.15. Search for happiness: what brings and takes away happiness***

For most of the young people, both believers and non-believers who participated in the focus group, happiness is found in sharing with others and in human relationships. Believers also mention that gratitude toward God and service to others are sources of happiness:

Happiness arises from gratitude: freely experiencing and appreciating life’s gifts, both personally and in others. Witnessing gratitude elevates, while resentment diminishes joy. The universal experience of gratitude, whether personal or shared, is deeply satisfying and a source of profound happiness.

The recognition of gratuity is common among both believers and non-believers: ‘For me, happiness in its fullness is related to the peace you achieve when you are grateful for something, whether it’s something very small or very large’. Another expression with a similar meaning: ‘Appreciating the small things of everyday life, whether simple moments or significant advances in our goals, is essential for finding happiness’. ‘Happiness lies in these details, whether big or small. It is not necessary

### Perceptions of the Sacrament of Reconciliation



**Figure 7.** Perceptions of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

to have an idealized vision or excessively fantasize about things that are unrealistic. Accepting reality as it is allows us to be happy in our day-to-day lives’.

Helping others, acquiring the tools to be supportive, and reaching out to others are sources of happiness. Likewise, accessing moments of solitude and personal intimacy is seen as necessary to develop on a path to fulfillment:

I don’t want to be repetitive, but I largely agree with what has been said. I find a lot of happiness in being surrounded by others and also in supporting others. I’ve also learned that it’s okay to be alone and enjoy my own company. It makes me happy to spend time with myself, get to know myself better, and do the things I enjoy both solo and with others.

Regarding what takes away happiness, the main concerns focused on a lack of time, anxiety about the future, and the feeling of wasting time: ‘For me, what takes away happiness is feeling like I didn’t use my time well. I suppose I made a mistake in what I didn’t do. Feeling like I’ve gone backward’.

For believers, happiness rests on the consistency of knowing oneself as a child of God and acting accordingly:

“Happiness fades when actions conflict with spiritual values and principles. Living in harmony with one’s beliefs fosters wholeness, while contradictions resonate in consciousness and undermine joy. True happiness arises from coherence with one’s own values and the recognition of others as children of God”.

Unhappiness, for believers, is connected to life being out of alignment with an external guiding order:

What generates the least happiness for me is feeling that I’m not on the right path in my life. The setbacks and challenges that arise along the way, and seeing how my ideas and expectations fade away, can be discouraging because the ideas I had disappear as the limits are self-imposed.

For non-believers, the awareness of finitude, in relation to time and life itself, is very clear as a presence of unease and expression of anxiety, and it takes away happiness:

What saddens me most is how quickly life passes, which often makes me anxious. Death worries me deeply, and unlike believers, I can't transcend that fear. Not being able to control tomorrow is a constant concern, and I think that's where the need to believe in something comes from—to cope with what we cannot control.

For believers, having spiritual support and 'intangible' goods acts as a kind of guarantee of happiness: 'We don't necessarily need something material to be happy; it's about being happy with what we're given every day, like family, friends, and having spiritual support that affirms to us that we're on the right path.'

For most young people, both believers and non-believers, happiness lies in human relationships and sharing with others. Believers also highlight gratitude towards God and service as key sources of happiness. However, the main concerns affecting happiness include lack of time, anxiety about the future, and the feeling of having wasted time. For believers, incongruence between actions and spiritual values leads to unhappiness, while non-believers experience anxiety about the finiteness of life and the lack of control over the future.

### 3. Conclusions

Religiosity and belief in God remain significant for Argentine youth, with prayer commonly practiced, even by agnostics or atheists in difficult times. Spirituality is increasingly personal, with over half praying in their own words, and 41% of believers reducing or limiting attendance at religious services, reflecting individualized faith. Secularization is evident, as 22% identify as non-religious, though over half believe in God, and 37% report stronger faith compared to five years ago. Morality and religiosity are largely dissociated; most Catholic youth view Mass attendance as unnecessary for being a good Christian and separate ethical values from religious belief, emphasizing a more personal and emotional role for faith.

Religion among young Argentines is closely linked to values such as solidarity, forgiveness, kindness, commitment, and humility, highlighting its role in promoting social peace and positive interpersonal relationships. However, there is less emphasis on justice and material detachment, suggesting a focus on immediate personal values rather than broader principles of social justice. Young people associate the image of God with benevolence and love.

The analysis of young Argentinians' perspectives on social and moral issues reveals a complex and diverse landscape. Political corruption is seen as one of the major social ailments, reflecting deep concern over political integrity within the local context. Regarding sexuality, young people adopt a relativistic stance, believing there is no right or wrong way to experience it, demonstrating greater acceptance of self-determination and openness to sexual diversity, with notable differences between men and women in their perceptions of these issues. Criticism of pornography also stands out, as many young people believe it negatively affects intimate relationships.

Concerning contraceptive use, Argentine youth show greater acceptance and less concern about its impact on intimacy compared to their international peers, likely due to favorable public policies and cultural normalization of reproductive control. Finally, environmental issues are seen as one of the most urgent challenges, with a high level of awareness and willingness to participate in ecological initiatives, with this concern being more pronounced among women. Regarding conscientious objection, there is significant support for freedom of conscience for medical professionals, reflecting a strong valuation of moral autonomy. Overall, these data illustrate a youth increasingly distanced from traditional norms in terms of ethics and sexuality, yet still committed to issues of social and environmental justice.

While there is significant support for punitive measures such as the death penalty in cases of serious crimes, the majority of young people also express a strong rejection of war as a means of resolving conflicts, reflecting a clear inclination towards pacifist approaches. Regarding surrogacy, the favorable position of young people - more women than men - indicates a growing acceptance of reproductive technologies, although ethical dilemmas persist regarding the commercialization of the body. However, this support does not extend to the legalization of prostitution, which is largely perceived negatively due to its association with exploitation and vulnerability. These ideas reveal how young Argentines approach contemporary ethical dilemmas, alternating between pragmatism in response to certain social phenomena and a critical stance toward others, demonstrating a nuanced attitude toward today's ethical and legal challenges.

Regarding those who identify as agnostic, atheist, or indifferent, the analysis concludes that, although many young people abandon religious faith, they do not renounce transcendence or spirituality. A considerable number of them still believe in life after death or turn to prayer in moments of desperation, reflecting the persistence of spiritual concerns and the impact of religious culture during crises, even among those who reject traditional religious doctrines. This suggests the human need to find meaning in life and transcendence.

The fact that 67% of young people recognize the importance of the sacrament of Confession as a means of reconciliation with God is encouraging, as it highlights the continued relevance of one of the key practices in Catholicism. The sacrament of forgiveness not only reconciles the believer with God but also heals the bond with the ecclesial community. However, the fact that a significant portion of young people distances themselves from other key aspects, such as Mass and the Eucharist, indicates a weakening of the understanding of the communal and sacrificial nature of the faith.

The Eucharist, considered the heart and summit of Christian life in Catholic theology, is viewed as fundamental by only 38% of young people, highlighting the disconnect between personal spiritual experience and sacramental liturgy. For the Church, the Eucharist is much more than a mere ritual; it is the center of Christian life, where the believer not only receives divine grace but also participates in Christ's sacrifice and in communion with the Body of Christ, which is the Church. This distancing may indicate a lack of proper catechetical formation or a diminished sensitivity towards the sacramental and communal dimension of the faith.

The 76% who claim they do not need to attend Mass to be a good Christian underscores contemporary individualism, which tends to separate the personal relationship with God from the communal and sacramental dimension. For the Church, the command to participate in Sunday Mass is not just a rule, but an expression of God's desire for the faithful to gather as the Body of Christ in fraternal communion. The celebration of the Eucharist is also a constant reminder of Jesus' sacrifice and an opportunity to renew one's faith.

The sacrament of marriage presents another area of tension. While half of the young people believe in its importance for strengthening marital love and facing difficulties, 55% do not perceive that it adds value to the love between two people. From the Catholic perspective, marriage is not simply a social contract or an expression of human love, but a sacrament that elevates the love between spouses to a participation in divine love. It is a lifelong commitment that reflects the union between Christ and his Church, sustained by sacramental grace. The perception that marriage adds nothing to human love may stem from a lack of understanding of this profound theological and spiritual meaning.

The data reveal both a loss of the sacramental dimension's centrality in the lives of young people and an opportunity to strengthen catechesis and evangelization, which can guide or reorient their spiritual search.

Despite a growing detachment from traditional religious institutions, Argentine youth exhibit a persistent search for transcendence and meaning, turning to spiritual practices like prayer in difficult times. This paradox highlights a spiritual restlessness that transcends religious affiliation. The Catholic Church faces the challenge and opportunity to address these longings through pastoral approaches that prioritize dialogue and reflection, engaging both believers and non-believers. Furthermore, the centrality of interpersonal relationships in achieving happiness underscores the essence of human connection, as mutual support and helping others emerge as key sources of fulfillment. This reaffirms Antonio Malo's assertion that 'the truth of the person lies in their relationship with the other' (Malo 2004, 219).

For both believers and non-believers, happiness appears to depend largely on the ability to form and sustain meaningful relationships and to appreciate the value of everyday moments. However, differences in sources of unhappiness reveal how beliefs and perceptions of life's transcendent meaning influence the experience of happiness or its absence. Believers often find comfort in aligning their lives with spiritual values and recognizing the divine, while non-believers tend to grapple with the awareness of finitude and existential uncertainty.

The connection between happiness and acts of sharing, giving, and dedicating oneself to others—identified by Argentine youth as a source of happiness—underscores the deeply relational nature of human experience, where personal well-being is intrinsically linked to the well-being of others. This perspective aligns with the idea that true fulfillment and self-realization are often achieved through service to others. Across many philosophical and religious traditions, altruism and service are regarded as essential pathways to a meaningful and happy life. For believers, a connection with God and a sense of gratitude are also tied to acts of service and sharing, further reinforcing the notion that happiness arises from living in harmony with spiritual and communal values.

Looking ahead, a valuable line of research involves exploring how a stronger sense of ecclesial belonging can be fostered among young people through concrete spaces of participation, listening, and formation. Strategies such as communal discernment groups, volunteer experiences with spiritual accompaniment, missions in vulnerable areas, the creation of digital content inspired by Christian values, or initiatives related to environmental care—a topic emphasized by the youth—could help cultivate a more vibrant and meaningful connection to faith and the Church. These initiatives also offer opportunities to nurture a critical spirituality, engaged with the challenges of the present. Investigating how to sustain these mediations over time and adapt them to the diversity of youth trajectories constitutes fertile ground for both academic reflection and pastoral action.

In line with these proposals, the findings of this study open up several directions for future research and practical application. First, they highlight the need to continue examining how young people reinterpret religious beliefs in cultural contexts marked by the fragmentation of traditional references. Second, they underscore the relevance of exploring how diverse forms of religiosity—not necessarily tied to institutional frameworks—are linked to meaning-making processes, solidarity, and ethical decision-making. From a practical standpoint, the results call for more flexible and dialogical pastoral approaches that recognize the plurality of youth experiences, their sensitivity to issues such as care for nature, inclusion, and decent work, and their preference for faith communities that value authenticity and commitment. It is also essential to investigate the role of digital mediations, social media, and contemporary languages in shaping the ways in which young people approach—or distance themselves from—communities of faith. In this regard, continuing these inquiries with research focused on young people's horizontal relationships with their peers, as well as their engagement with technology, work, and education—key areas of personal development—will be particularly relevant to better understand the youth universe in this cultural moment and to refine formative proposals aimed at supporting and accompanying them in their transition to adulthood.

## Notes

1. Ref. <https://www.pusc.it/research-project/footprints>.
2. <https://www.indec.gov.ar/indec/web/Institucional-Indec-BasesDeDatos>.
3. <https://www.conicet.gov.ar/creencias-valores-y-actitudes-en-la-sociedad-argentina/>.
4. <https://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>.
5. <https://uca.edu.ar/es/observatorio-de-la-deuda-social-argentina>.
6. The 2013 Argentine Social Debt Survey conducted by the Social Debt Observatory (ODSA) aligns with Fortunato Mallimaci's findings, with both studies reporting identical percentages in this area for the country as a whole. See Fortunato Mallimaci (ed.), *Atlas de las creencias en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2013, p. 36. This observation is significant as it highlights the consistency of results from studies carried out by different institutions, underscoring the religiosity of the Argentine people.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Author contributions

CRedit: **Alejandra Planker**: Investigation; **Teresa Téramo**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing.

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