

The End of “Catholic” Sexuality?

Marcantonio Caltabiano – University of Messina, Italy

Gianpiero Dalla-Zuanna – University of Padova, Italy

Abstract

In recent decades, the progressive decrease in the number of practicing Catholics among young Italians has been accompanied by a considerable divergence of their sexual behavior from the teachings of the Catholic Church. In this paper we want to verify if even among young Italians who declare themselves Catholic there has been a departure from the religious precepts on sexuality, or if they – becoming a smaller group – have strengthened their adhesion to the indications of the Catholic church. We examine the data of two almost identical surveys on national samples of young Italian university students carried out in 2000 and 2017 through an analysis of the changes in opinions and behaviors.

Our results show that the progressive reduction of young people adhering to Catholic faith has been accompanied by opinions and behaviors increasingly distant from the norms of the Catholic church, for example about premarital relations and homosexuality. However, it is still early for an end of Catholic sexuality, especially for young women and for some specific aspects, such as the growing value attributed by young people to couple fidelity.

The End of “Catholic” Sexuality?

1. Introduction

Numerous recent documents of the Catholic Church exalts the importance of sexuality within the marital relationship.¹ Moreover, as a consequence of the Council Vatican II (1962-65), the declared aims of catholic marriage has deeply changed, increasing the importance to the relationship between groom and bride while decreasing the centrality of the reproductive function.² This shows that even within the hierarchies of the Catholic Church and the Catholic theologians and moralists, there has been a move towards a change of meaning attributed to sex, oriented in an affective rather than merely procreative sense.³

Despite this important change of perspective, the catholic doctrine on sexual, marital and reproductive behavior is rather stable over the last century. Sexual intercourses are permitted only between heterosexual spouses, and in all other cases the chastity is the proposed behavior. Masturbation, homosexual acts and pornography are considered sins. Moreover, the catholic ethic permits only natural family planning, prohibits the breakdown of marital bonds, encourages the catholic couples to have children.

These precepts – that are the same for men and women – have not been able to stop the spread of alternative behaviors among Catholics. The title of this article is inspired by the results of a famous research by Westoff and Jones (1979): after the 1960s, the fertility behavior of US Catholics has become not much different to that of their US non-Catholic peers, unlike what happened in the previous decennia.

The results of Westoff and Jones cannot be automatically extended to other aspects of sexual, marital and reproductive behavior and to all territorial contexts. We focus on Italy, where until a few years ago almost all the people were baptized, belonging to the Catholic Church from the beginning of their life, and where the influence of Vatican and local churches was and is intense for many aspects of social and political life. Livi-Bacci (1977) shows that in the long period 1911-1961 the drop in fertility was anticipated in the provinces where the proportion of voters in favor of divorce was greater in the 1974 referendum, and the statistical explanatory power of this indicator is stronger than other structural variables, as education, socio economic status (SES) and level of urbanization. Castiglioni and Vitali (2019) show that a significant territorial connection persists between some behaviors (as out-of-wedlock children and marital breakdown) and indicators of the strength of influence of Catholic Church. Istat (2016, p. 11) shows that for those who marry in church, the probability of marital breakdown was lower than those who marry in the town-hall.⁴

¹ See, for example, the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Letitia* (The Joy of Love) written by Pope Francis in 2016 at the conclusion of the Synod of Bishops on the family, especially points 150-152. See also the references – quoted in the same document – to the catechesis on this theme developed by Pope John Paul II.

² The 1917 Canon Law (article 1013) states that “the primary end of marriage is the procreation and education of children. Its secondary end is mutual help and the allaying of concupiscence”. The 1983 Canon Law (article 1055) states that “the marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman establish themselves a partnership of their whole life, and which of its own very nature is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and the procreation and upbringing of children, has, between baptized, been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament”.

³ In social research on sexuality, four different meanings attributed to sex are established: ascetic, procreative, affective and hedonistic (Barbagli et al. 2010, pages 11-12; DeLamater 1981). The ascetic orientation consists in the voluntary renunciation of sexual activity; according to the procreative orientation, the exclusive purpose of sexuality is to have children into marriage; according to affective orientation, sexual activity is a reciprocal expression of love between the two partners, and at the same time serves to consolidate the relationship between them; finally, for the hedonistic orientation the main purpose of sexual activity is to achieve physical pleasure. These orientations are interrelated and not mutually exclusive.

During the first years of the 21st century the incidence of living together without being married and having children out-of-wedlock is lower for those who regularly attend religious rites (Salvini and Vignoli 2014). For the male and female cohorts born in 1937-1988, a whole series of sexual behaviors – like having the first sexual intercourse before 16 or 18 years of age, having a high number of sexual partners, having oral and anal sex ...) are less widespread among people closer to Catholicism (Garelli 2010). Although very few Italian Catholic spouses use natural family planning, their contraceptive and reproductive behavior during 1980-2005 is not the same as that of non-Catholics: coitus-related methods (condom and withdraw) are more common among them, they use less frequently pill and IUD, they practice voluntary abortion less, they have a higher number of children (Dalla-Zuanna et al. 2005); Finally, Caltabiano et al. (2006) for a national sample of young people interviewed in 2000, showed a strong interdependence between the timing of abandoning the regular frequency of religious rites and the timing of sexual initiation. Even extending our glance in the Western world beyond Italy, several recent research contributions show the persistence of the influence of religiosity on sexual, reproductive and marital behavior (see e.g. for religion & fertility: Guetto et. al. 2015, Berman et. al. 2018 and Herzer 2019; for religion & cohabitation: Perelli-Harris and Bernardi 2015; for religious socialization & sexual behavior: James-Hawkins 2018; for religion & pornography: Perry and Whitehead 2019).

As the Catholic morality persists in influencing in a different way some sexual, marital and reproductive behaviors, it is important to continue to study this link as we do in this article, considering the influence of religion on the sexual behavior of young Italian students in the early part of the 21st century, a period in which both sexuality and religious behavior have had profound transformations.

The individual relationship with transcendence is something very intimate and very difficult to define and measure (Berger 1969; Castegnaro et al. 2010; Pace 2015). However, the quantitative indicators suggest for the first years of the new century a fast detachment of the Italian population from the institutional Catholic religion. The people who never go to Mass increase and those who go to Mass regularly decrease (Barbagli 2016). Bonarini (2013, p. 40), after a detailed analysis of different sources, shows that *“the average level of participation in Mass at age 15-24 falls from 35% for generations born in 1976-78 to 26% of generations born in 1986-89, a decrease of almost one percentage point per year of birth”*; people who claim to believe in God diminished; people who pray decreased; people who claim to trust the Catholic Church also diminished (Berzano 2014; Istituto Toniolo 2014 and 2015; Garelli 2016; Castegnaro et al. 2010).

In her *Introduction* to a recent study on religion of Italian youth, Ruspini (2019, p. 16) summarizes the recent research on this topic: *“Several studies have shown that [even in Italy] the Millennial generation is characterized by a growing distancing from institutionalized religion. The new generations are moving away from the Churches: they struggle to understand the institutional religious language; they criticize the simple passage of norms, rules and religious precepts and the gap between the original religious message and the rigidity of religious institutions; they declare themselves strangers to religious institutions perceived as unjust and hierarchical (...). If the boys and girls find the Pope credible, at the same time the attitude towards the Catholic Church remains between the prudent and the suspicious”*.

The detachment from the Church could lead – quite simply – to a proportional diffusion of sexual behavior not in line with the dictates of Catholic morality.

Furthermore, this decrease in the number of the faithful could lead to their selection and “purification”: the passage from “religion of belonging” to a “chosen religion” could generate cohesive communities, composed of faithful more aligned to the Church also in sexuality. This

⁴ Impicciatore and Billari (2012) show that the link between type of union (cohabitation, civil marriage, religious marriage) and probability of couple breakdown in Italy is not causal, but due to unobserved heterogeneity. See also Caltabiano et al. (2006), Craugun (2017) and Moon et al. (2019), who discuss a reverse effect of sexual attitudes and behaviors on religiosity. More generally, the statistical link between variables measured by tables or simple regression models could always be spurious, due to the influence of variables not considered in the table/model.

could be in line with what other authors suggest as regards other intimate behaviors. McQuillan (2006) notes that – in contexts of controlled fertility – religious people practice high fertility only if religion pervades massively their whole existence, for example by participating in strongly identifying groups.

This possibility, however, contrasts with what can be deduced from other processes, deeply connected with the revolution of customs that has affected Italy in recent decades. Up to the 1950s a well defined model of sexuality was proposed by the Italian Church almost obsessively. The respect of *de sexto et de nono* (The Sixth Commandment: *You Shall Not Commit Adultery*. The Ninth Commandment: *You Shall Not Covet Your Neighbor's Wife*) appeared as the key factor to define or not the closeness to the Church. However, during the last decades, with the spread in Italy as elsewhere of the sexual revolution, the difficulty of proposing this moral behavior has led to a growing aphasia of the practical pastoral activity of the Catholic Church in the field of sex. Although the Church's Magisterium has spoken recently on these issues (see again note 1), very little is spoken of sexuality, even within the ecclesial groups, with a few circumscribed exception.⁵ This aphasia can even lead to full membership of the Church while practicing behaviors that are not in line with Catholic morality. What has happened (and still happens) worldwide among most of Catholics for contraception – and has happened among US Catholic for fertility – could happen for sexuality, in Italy as elsewhere. Some authors see this phenomenon as a symptom of the strength of Catholicism, which would prove to be sufficiently flexible to adapt to external changes without losing the adhesion of the faithful (Garelli 2013). The practice adopted by the faithful (*sensus fidelium*) would have been silently imposed as the practical Catholic morality, different from the orthodox one, but not perceived as questioning the Catholic faith or a full adherence to the Church. As a result, the relationship between religion and sex could have weakened, and the sexuality of religious people could be less distinguishable from that of their non-religious peers, as shown by Westoff and Jones for US fertility.

All things considered, it is possible that during the last years the strength of the statistical links between religion and sex has strengthened, has remained almost constant or has weakened. We test these possibilities using two databases of nationally representative Italian university students, sampled and interviewed following identical procedures in 2000 and 2017. In part 2 we describe data, also illustrating the statistical methodology. Subsequently, parts 3 and 4 describe the changes that took place between 2000 and 2017 in religion, sex and the link between them. Part 5 is devoted to summary of results and discussion.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Data

This study is based on Selfy (Sexual and Emotional LIfe of Youth), a survey coordinated by a group of researchers from the Universities of Florence, Padua and Messina. The survey was carried out in the first half of 2017 in 28 Italian universities with the aim of drawing an updated picture of sexual and emotional opinions and behaviours among Italian university students. It reiterates an almost identical survey carried out 17 years previously (The Sis Survey: Sexuality of Italian Students). In 2000 5,000 students were surveyed and in 2017 8,000, all attending undergraduate courses in economics and statistics in Italian public universities. The degrees in Economics and Statistics were chosen because they both have a very high percentage of students attending lessons regularly, and the numbers of males and females students are usually balanced. For both 2000 and 2017, the data

⁵ In a completely different social context and for totally different reasons, this aphasia had already occurred in Catholic Europe during the first spread of birth control, before the decisive contrary stance expressed in 1930 by Pius XI with the encyclical letter *Casti Connubii* (Dalla-Zuanna 2011).

were post-stratified at the macro-region level to obtain representative results at the national level (see Dalla-Zuanna et al. 2019 for further details and an extended description of the survey methodology).

The questionnaire was composed of about 200 closed questions and took around 30 minutes to be completed. It collected information on respondents' personal and parental background, the relationship with parents, religiosity (including church attendance of both students and their parents during adolescence and at interview), participation in at-risk behaviours, school performance, friendship network, first sexual intercourse, romantic relationships, and living arrangements. A final section dealt with opinions and attitudes concerning various aspects of affective and sexual behaviour. Most information refers to different stages of adolescence (ages 11-13, 14-15, 16-18).

The questionnaires were filled in during a one-hour lesson, under the discreet surveillance of both the professor of the course and a researcher, who presented the survey and was ready to answer questions, if any. The researcher informed the students that the questionnaires were anonymous and would not be used at an individual level. After they had been filled in, the questionnaires were sealed in an envelope, recollected and mailed to the survey coordinators. This procedure resulted in no refusals to fill in the questionnaires in class.

Although students are not representative of Italian young people as a whole, the direction of the selection is well-known. A long tradition of studies on the sexual life of students shows that students usually delay sex more than early workers (see, e.g., Denissenko et al., 1999; Whitbeck et al., 1999; Kontula, 2004), particularly if – during their lives as students – they live with their parents (Castiglioni, 2004). In addition, the sexuality of the students of Economics and Statistics is in line with, or only slightly delayed and less intense than, that of university students in other fields of study (see Dalla-Zuanna et al. 2019 for detailed comparisons).

2.2. Methods

In part 3 we explore how the sexual behaviour and opinions of religious and non religious students changed during the first part of the 21st century, separately by gender. We classify them in three groups: (1) sexual behaviours that potentially all the students experienced; (2) sexual behaviours of non-virgin students (3,086 in 2000 and 6,085 in 2017); (3) opinions about sex expressed by all the students. We firstly describe the changes in religion and sex by the means of descriptive statistics as proportions and cross-tabulations. All these measures are weighted to make them representative of Italian university students of economics and statistics aged around 20 at the national level (see Dalla-Zuanna et al. 2019). These procedures are applied to the samples of 2000 and 2017 as a whole, and also on two “extreme” groups of interviewees – the most and the less religious – at 2017. To conclude this part, we measure for two particular aspects (the proportion of students still virgin at the 18th birthday and the opinion expressed on the betrayal when committed by a woman) the effect of the change in religiosity between 2000 and 2017, without taking into account the possible influence of other covariates.

This first series of elaborations describes the profound change in religion and sex of university students, but they are not sufficient to determine if the changes in the relationship between them are due to compositional effects of other relevant individual characteristics and experiences – collected in the questionnaire – that could simultaneously influence both of them. Consequently, we fit some logistic models on the merged Sis-Selfy databases, modelling 35 different dichotomised sexual behaviors / opinions, where the key explanatory variable is always the combination *religiosity at interview* \times *gender* \times *year of interview*, that has eight possible combinations: (1) Men 2000 not religious (reference), (2) Men 2000 religious, (3) Men not religious 2017, (4) Men religious 2017, (5) Women not religious 2000, (6) Women religious 2000, (7)

Women not religious 2017, (8) Women religious 2017. Here we also include a wide set of covariates to take into account possible confounding factors.⁶

Religiosity is measured by the variable “Importance of Religion in your life”, contrasting None/Little with Quite/Much; we also tested the variables “Mass attendance at age 13” and “Mass attendance at interview”, that resulted less strong predictors, although in the same direction. We compare the confidence interval ($p=0.05$) of odds ratios (OR) for religious and not religious respondents of the same gender and interviewed in the same year, verifying if the two intervals overlap or not. These comparisons between ORs based on two confidence intervals give more conservative results than those that would be obtained by modifying the baseline modality. In other words, when the confidence intervals of two ORs do not overlap we are sure that the difference between them would be statistically significant if either of the two modalities of the object of comparison were set as a baseline. Comparing the results of these logistic models, we carry out a sort of meta-analysis, going to see if – distinctly for men and women – the statistical relationship between religiosity and sexual behaviors / opinions increases, remains constant or decreases in a statistically significant way between 2000 and 2017.

3. Sex and religion of Italian students: a first analysis comparing Sis 2000 and Selfy 2017

3.1. Sexual behavior and opinions concerning sex

Let us now focus on the main changes between 2000 and 2017 in sexual behavior and opinions concerning sex of Italian students (see the table A1 in Appendix, columns 1-4), briefly summarizing in five points the results of Sis-Selfy surveys, extensively reported in Dalla-Zuanna et al. (2019).

First, the behaviors and opinions of young men in a stable relationship in 2017 tend to approach those that in 2000 were typical of a large majority of young women. The first sexual intercourse occurs more and more often with a same-age girl and within an emotional relationship. Moreover, once in a couple, boys tend to betray less, converging to the behaviour of girls. This rejection of betrayal is also manifested in their opinions: among boys as among girls, sexual fidelity is increasingly considered indispensable within a couple relationship. As already reported by Garelli (2010, p. 289); “*In fact, it is now becoming common in Italy, for the emergence of instances typical of advanced modernity, a vision of affectivity and sexuality that enhances the stability and exclusivity of the couple, the importance of sex as an expression of the quality of the relationship, the centrality of the communication between the partners, the exchange of pleasure, the care of the relationship*”.⁷ This change is not specific of young Italians, as they follows patterns already observed elsewhere, for example among Finnish and British young people (Kontula 2009, p. 70; Mercer et al. 2013). Kontula titles the eighth chapter of his book “*From infidelity to the renaissance of romanticism...*”. These changes are a sign of the ever increasing diffusion of the affective meaning attributed to modern sexuality, and therefore have little to do with religion. However, these

⁶ They are: age at interview, area of residence during teens, population size of the municipality of residence during teens, parents’ education, father social class, mother was working during teens, relationship with father and mother, parents divorced before the respondent was 16, reaction to parents rules during teens, parents allowed to come back home late on Saturdays nights during teens, body mass index at interview, had at least three health problems during teens (eating disorders, insomnia, strong acne problems, stuttering, serious hearing or vision problems, excessive sweating of the hands, enuresis, halitosis), satisfied with own physical appearance during teens, diploma score at junior and senior high school, type of high school attended. Full model estimated are not shown but are available on request.

⁷ There are numerous recent documents in which the magisterium of the Catholic Church exalts the importance of sexuality within the marital relationship. See for example the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Letitia* (The Joy of Love) written by Pope Francis in 2016 at the conclusion of the Synod of Bishops on the family, especially in points 150-152. See also the references, contained therein, to the catecheses on this theme developed by St. John Paul II.

changes mark an approach of the common behaviour towards the exclusivity of the couple relationship, traditionally supported by Catholic morality.

Second, when outside a couple, the young women of 2017 converge to sexual behaviors and opinions that, in 2000, were typical of most of young men. There is a net drop in girls expecting other girls to remain virgin until marriage, and their acceptance of casual sex doubled. Moreover, the average number of girls' occasional partners increased substantially. In other words, when outside a couple relationship, even for young women, hedonistic rather than affective sexual behaviours and attitudes seem to be increasingly widespread. The negative side of this change is a marked increase – among boys, but especially among girls – in unprotected sex with occasional partners, and in contracting a sexually transmitted disease.

However, even if today Venus and Mars are closer than at the beginning of the century (Bertone 2010), we have not observed a complete gender convergence among students. If the early stages of sexual life (first petting, first relationship, first sexual intercourse) take place at a similar age and in a similar way between genders, casual sex is still more common among boys, who also use pornography, masturbate, and talk about sex with their friends more often than their female peers. The differences between males and females in terms of opinions are profound too. Men are more favourable to casual sex and affairs.

Third, non-heterosexual behaviour and opinions on homosexuality deserve a special mention. The proportion of young people who had homosexual experiences (or felt free to declare them) increased over time, especially among girls. In 2017, homosexuality and bisexuality among Italian university students seems to be more common among girls. Also acceptance of same-sex partnerships increased among boys and – again – especially among girls. This pattern also mirrors that observed in the UK and Finland during the first decade of the 21st century (Mercer et al. 2013, p. 1781; Kontula 2009, pp. 118-121). The pattern is likely to be connected with a new greater sexual freedom for girls who are not in a couple, since for them the change is more in behaviour than in sexual identity.⁸

Fourth, among males the presence of a double standard in sexual attitudes is still much more rooted. Although it was less marked in 2017 than in 2000, there were still many male students who approved or rejected certain sexual behaviours differently if the protagonist is a boy or a girl. Among female students, on the other hand, double standard was present in 2000, but almost disappeared in 2017.

The last important result is a 'closure' of the territorial differences within Italy concerning the age at first sexual intercourse for girls. In 2000, in the two most southern regions (Calabria and Sicily) female students' first sexual intercourse took place three years later than that of their male peers. In 2017, both Sicilian and Calabrian men and women had their first intercourse at the age of 17-18, a figure in line with the national average. This is another part of the 'catching-up' by the south with the conjugal, sexual, reproductive and fertility behaviour already widespread in the north of the country (and – before that – in the north of Europe). This last result is a further confirmation of a diffusive process that is also present in Sis-Selfy data.

3.2. Religion

Traditionally, young Italians were socialized to religion through the imitation of parents' behavior, the attendance to catechism and Mass, the weekly hour of catholic religion at school, the participation to recreational activities organized by the Church. Some, among young people socialized in this way, developed attachment to the Church continuing to attend Mass when adult,

⁸ For a possible explanation of the higher diffusion of homosexual experiences among girls than among boys, see Kimmel (2004).

and in some cases joining Catholic associations or becoming Catholic volunteers (as animators of youth catechesis groups, heads of Catholic scout or sport groups, and so on), initiating in turn their children to religious socialization. Rarely people without a family religious socialization became religious adults. The detachment from Catholicism, which has many faces, has been advancing for some time, and in recent years has become very accelerated: the proposals for religious socialization are less intense and varied, as the “supply” often is lacking or very weak, due also to the rapid decrease of young priests and nuns (Dalla-Zuanna and Ronzoni 2003; Diotallevi 2005; Bonarini 2013a, 2013b; Ufficio Centrale di Statistica della Chiesa 2019a, 2019b). Moreover, the generational chain often do not start, due to the growing proportion of non-religious parents. Finally, the religious socialization – when it is present – more rarely results in adhering to the Church when adult (Ruspini and Nesti 2019).

The rapidity of these processes during the first years of the new century is evident when comparing Sis with Selfy. The drop in attendance at religious rites is impressive (Table 1): in 2017, students who went to Mass at least once a month were less than 14% among men, 23% among women, values more than halved compared to 2000 (36% men, 51% women). Compared to what happened in previous generations (see the quotation of Bonarini 2013b in the introductory part), the detachment from the attendance at the festive Mass would be accelerated, abundantly exceeding one percentage point for each annual cohort among the students born in 1980-1997. Also significant is the increase in students who say that religion is little or not at all important in their lives: in 2000 they were a minority (40% among men, 25% among women) while in 2017 they are the majority (66% among men and 55% among women).

Table 1. Mass attendance and importance of religion in life at interview. Column %.

	Gender of the respondent			
	Man		Woman	
	2000	2017	2000	2017
	Mass attendance			
Never	28.3	53.9	13.6	36.9
Sometimes during the year	35.7	32.3	35.0	40.0
Once a month	8.4	3.6	9.2	6.4
2-3 times a month	10.3	4.1	13.7	6.5
Once a week or more	17.3	6.1	28.5	10.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Religion importance			
None	13.7	31.8	4.6	19.0
Low	25.9	34.5	19.9	33.6
Quite	42.0	25.4	47.1	35.0
Much	18.5	8.3	28.4	12.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Sis-Selfy data show several clues about changes in the process of religious socialization. We match the young student’s attendance at Mass at 13 with his/her parents when he/she was that age.⁹ Table 2 highlights three aspects. First of all, the number of parents who – when the boy/girl was 13 – never went to Mass, or went only sometimes during the year, significantly increased: they were 38% in 2000, 51% in 2017 (see last column). Secondly, in 2017 it becomes very rare that a 13-year-old child attends Mass if his/her parents never go, showing the exhaustion of a religious socialization that in 2000 persisted even without the support of the family of origin. Finally, in 2017

⁹ Considering attendance at Mass at age 13 is interesting, because in Italy it is very rare that those who no longer attend Mass at age 13 then resume during adolescence. For example, among those who claimed to attend Mass regularly at age 13, the proportion of students attending functions regularly at the time of the interview was 43.7% in 2000 and 26.8% in 2017. On the contrary, among those who declared never to go to Mass at age 13, the proportion of students attending regularly functions at the time of the interview was 1.3% in 2000 and 0.7% in 2017.

the frequency of transmission of Mass attendance between parents and offspring decreased: in 2000 when both parents went to Mass every Sunday, only 16.6% did not attend with the same intensity at 13. In 2017 this proportion has risen to 28.0%.

Table 2. Mass attendance of parents and children when child was 13-year-old

Parents	Children (Row%)					Total	Mass attendance of parents (column %)
	Never	Sometimes during the year	Once a month	2-3 times a month	Once a week or more		
2000							
Both never	38.5	19.5	6.3	16.1	19.6	100	10
One never, one irregularly	4.6	29.7	13.2	25.9	26.5	100	28
Both irregularly	0.5	8.2	11.4	32.2	47.8	100	16
One regularly, one irregularly	3.5	10.3	11.8	24.4	50.0	100	26
Both regularly	1.1	2.5	2.8	10.2	83.4	100	20
Total	6.1	14.5	9.8	22.4	47.2	100	100
2017							
Both never	68.8	14.7	5.1	5.2	6.1	100	19
One never, one irregularly	13.8	49.9	11.5	13.9	10.9	100	32
Both irregularly	3.1	14.4	19.6	38.6	24.3	100	15
One regularly, one irregularly	7.8	19.7	16.2	28.9	27.3	100	21
Both regularly	1.7	4.9	3.8	17.6	72.0	100	13
Total	19.7	26.2	11.5	19.4	23.2	100	100

Another aspect of religious socialization is the participation in youth groups organized by the Church during pre-adolescence and adolescence (Table 3).¹⁰ Participation in groups between 2000 and 2017 decreases, both for the three age-classes covered by the retrospective question (11-13, 14-15, 16-18) and at interview, for men as well as for women. However, this decrease is less strong than that observed in the participation at religious rites or the importance of religion, also because it was already small in 2000. For example, attendance at groups at the time of the interview decreases from 8 to 5% for men, 12 to 8% for women.

Finally, it is also worth noting that in 2017 the proportion of young people attending groups is almost the same as those attending Mass every week, while in 2000 a significant part of those who went to Mass regularly did not participate in any ecclesial group. These identical proportions could be a consequence of a further “selection”: young people attending festive mass in 2017 are more involved in ecclesial life than those who went every week to mass in 2000. Moreover, these selected students attending Mass and participating to Catholic groups may have “radicalized” their position, fully embracing Catholic norms on sexual life.

Table 3. Attendance to religious groups at different ages (% of often or very often).

	Gender of the respondent			
	Man		Woman	
	2000	2017	2000	2017
11-13	26.3	23.6	37.1	27.7
14-15	17.5	15.3	28.1	20.6
16-18	12.7	9.8	18.9	14.0
At interview	7.6	5.3	12.0	7.8

¹⁰ In table 3 we exclude catechism as – in one way or another – it is attended between ages 6 and 13 by the large majority of Italian children and teenagers, given that in 1995-2000 more than 90% of the Italian children of catholic parents were baptized, and that around 90% of these baptized children received the First Communion and Confirmation (Bonarini 2013b, pp. 34-36).

3.3. Comparing “extreme” groups

We begin the analysis of the relationship between religion and sex studying the sexual behavior of two “extreme” groups: the *Papists* and the *No-God’s* in 2017 (Table 4). *Papists* (126 men and 163 women) think that religion is very important in their life, go to Mass every week and attend religious groups often or very often. *No-God’s* (336 men and 173 women) believe the religion is not at all important and have never gone to Mass, neither when 13 nor in the year preceding the interview, and also their parents never went to Mass when they were 13.

Table 4. Contrasting *Papists* and *No-God* students (see the text for definition). % who experienced some sexual behaviors, interviewed in 2017

	Gender of the respondent			
	Man		Woman	
	No-God	Papist	No-God	Papist
	All			
Watching porn on web during the last year (at least sometimes)	93.1	73.6	26.8	16.1
Masturbation (at least sometimes)	93.5	76.5	54.8	19.5
Homosexual attraction (at least once in life)	8.8	4.1	30.2	6.8
Homosexual experience (at least once in life)	5.9	5.4	28.1	11.3
First sexual intercourse before the 16 th birthday	25.3	8.6	27.8	6.1
First sexual intercourse before the 18 th birthday	54.6	31.6	61.4	37.0
	Non virgin			
Betrayed the partner (at least once)	26.3	16.2	19.2	6.2
Sex without loving a partner (at least once)	58.4	25.2	42.4	22.7
Had three sexual partners or more (in life)	61.2	32.5	57.3	16.8
Had only one sexual partner (in life)	25.5	57.4	23.8	63.5
The women proposed to have the first sex (at first sex)	15.5	15.1	8.0	3.2
Occasional partner (at first sex)	41.9	11.5	24.1	4.4

The strong differences between these two clusters are in the expected direction. Only two variables show reduced differences for men: masturbation and women proposing to have the first sexual intercourse. These data show that also in 2017 the sexual behavior of Catholic students actively engaged in ecclesial groups was different from that of non-religious students. We can therefore verify to what extent the rapid detachment of the Church between Italian students in the 2000-2017 influenced the change in sexual behavior (see Table 5).

In 2017, 50.1% of male students and 49.9% of female students were no longer virgin at their 18th birthday, with a significant increase compared to 2000 (35.8% men, 33.1% women). If in 2017 the distribution of students by importance of religion had remained identical to that recorded in 2000, this change would have been less rapid for men (47.3%) but especially for women (44.7%). Table 5 also shows that the changes have been more drastic among religious youth, and thus here the discriminating force of religion lose strength, showing at least a partial sunset of Catholic sexuality. In the second part of Table 5 (opinion on female betrayal), the increase in disapproval is slowed by the detachment from the Church, because the religious youth – in 2000 as in 2017 – rate negatively this behavior, and the variation is similar among those more or less religious. Thus, in this case the change towards the “post-modern romantic couple” is slowed down – and not accelerated – by the progressive detachment of young Italians from the Catholic religion.

Table 5 examines the changes between 2000 and 2017 in the relationship between importance of religion and two variables related to sex (virginity at 18 years; personal opinion on “escapade”). In the next section we make this analysis more extensive and systematic, keeping a large number of relevant covariates under control and considering a wide range of sexual opinions and behaviours.

Table 5. Measuring the effect of declining importance of religion on early sex and opinion on female betrayal

	Religion importance				Total
	None	Low	Quite	Much	
First sexual intercourse before the 18th birthday (%)					
Men					
2000	49.8	39.1	33.4	26.3	35.8
2017	54.2	52.0	45.5	39.9	50.1
2017 (Applying the distribution of “Importance of religion” in 2000)					47.3
Women					
2000	41.5	41.9	34.6	22.7	33.1
2017	59.0	56.0	43.2	37.1	49.9
2017 (Applying the distribution of “Importance of religion” in 2000)					44.7
A young women has an “escapade” in a couple relationship (% agree)					
Men					
2000	25.7	10.5	11.1	10.7	13.0
2017	10.6	9.5	10.2	6.9	9.9
2017 (Applying the distribution of “Importance of religion” in 2000)					9.5
Women					
2000	10.6	6.6	3.5	2.5	4.1
2017	6.3	3.9	3.1	1.4	3.8
2017 (Applying the distribution of “Importance of religion” in 2000)					2.9

4. Logistic models

To clarify the mechanism we use for measuring permanence and change in the relationship between sex and religion, we show detailed results for three relevant opinions and three behaviors related to these opinions (Table 6).

The effect of religion on the opinion concerning virginity until marriage loses strength between 2000 and 2017. In 2017 the confidence intervals for the hazard of agreeing with the statement “a young men/women should stays virgin until marriage” become overlapping between religious and not religious respondents both for men and women. For the hazard of respondents experiencing of sexual intercourse before age 18, the confidence intervals become overlapping for men, but not for women, for whom religiosity remains relevant in postponing first intercourse also in 2017.

The second aspect we consider is betrayal: here instead the influence of religiosity is minimal, as the confidence intervals for the odd ratios always overlap both for opinion and behavior, with the exception of males opinion in 2000.

Finally, religion keeps its relevance in influencing respondents’ opinion on homosexual experiences: confidence intervals never overlap. However, the influence of religiosity is null for respondents’ homosexual experiences, as confidence intervals always overlap.

Extending our analysis to the full set of opinions and sexual behaviours, we compare the confidence intervals for the hazard ratios of agreeing with a certain opinion or having had a certain behaviour for religious and not religious interviewees of the same gender, interviewed in 2000 or 2017 (Table A1 in Appendix, columns 5-8). When the two intervals overlap, at least in part, we write NO, showing the lack of connection between religion and sex, whereas if the two intervals are separated we write YES, showing a statistically significant link. Thus, the couple YES/NO means a decreasing influence of religion over opinion/behaviour, the couple NO/YES means an increasing influence, the couples YES/YES means a permanent influence, and the couple NO/NO means a stability in the absence of influence.

Table 6. Odd ratio and 95% confidence intervals for a respondents to agree to the following behaviors by gender and year of interview. In bold the OR confidence intervals when religious and non religious people do not overlap

Gender of respondent	Year	Religiosity	Odd ratio	95% CI		Odd ratio	95% CI	
				Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper
<i>Opinions (I agree that...)</i>								
				A young men remains virgin until marriage		A young women remains virgin until marriage		
Men	2000	Not religious	1.000	-	-	1.000	-	-
		Religious	2.013***	1.556	2.605	1.918***	1.523	2.417
	2017	Not religious	0.957	0.735	1.246	0.798*	0.630	1.011
		Religious	1.577***	1.200	2.071	1.344**	1.002	1.720
Women	2000	Not religious	1.868***	1.409	2.478	1.218	0.939	1.581
		Religious	4.674***	3.670	5.952	3.438***	2.765	4.275
	2017	Not religious	2.022***	1.557	2.626	1.314**	1.036	1.667
		Religious	2.716***	2.093	3.525	2.075***	1.638	2.629
				A young men in a couple has an escapade		A young women in a couple has an escapade		
Men	2000	Not religious	1.000	-	-	1.000	-	-
		Religious	0.783**	0.622	0.986	0.687**	0.504	0.937
	2017	Not religious	0.505***	0.393	0.649	0.555***	0.401	0.767
		Religious	0.470***	0.357	0.619	0.433***	0.299	0.629
Women	2000	Not religious	0.093***	0.059	0.149	0.359***	0.236	0.546
		Religious	0.039***	0.025	0.062	0.197***	0.135	0.287
	2017	Not religious	0.079***	0.053	0.117	0.236***	0.158	0.352
		Religious	0.042***	0.025	0.070	0.127***	0.078	0.207
				A young men has homosexual intercourse		A young women has homosexual intercourse		
Men	2000	Not religious	1.000	-	-	1.000	-	-
		Religious	0.517***	0.394	0.679	0.479***	0.382	0.600
	2017	Not religious	3.112***	2.480	3.905	2.684***	2.179	3.306
		Religious	1.442***	1.123	1.852	1.386***	1.108	1.733
Women	2000	Not religious	2.544***	1.974	3.277	1.068	0.843	1.352
		Religious	1.142	0.909	1.435	0.473***	0.384	0.583
	2017	Not religious	13.309***	10.389	17.048	4.680***	3.739	5.858
		Religious	5.142***	4.048	6.532	2.052***	1.649	2.554
<i>Behaviors (Respondent had...)</i>								
				Sexual intercourse before age 18		Betrayed his/her partner		
Men	2000	Not religious	1.000	-	-	1.000	-	-
		Religious	0.699***	0.567	0.861	0.945	0.719	1.242
	2017	Not religious	1.628***	1.333	1.989	0.878	0.676	1.139
		Religious	1.263**	1.017	1.567	0.833	0.625	1.111
Women	2000	Not religious	1.163	0.922	1.466	0.475***	0.339	0.667
		Religious	0.651***	0.533	0.794	0.365***	0.271	0.492
	2017	Not religious	2.282***	1.848	2.817	0.559***	0.418	0.746
		Religious	1.441***	1.166	1.782	0.321***	0.232	0.444
Homosexual experiences at least once								
Men	2000	Not religious	1.000	-	-			
		Religious	0.975	0.646	1.471			
	2017	Not religious	1.160	0.794	1.695			
		Religious	1.464***	0.968	2.212			
Women	2000	Not religious	0.944	0.606	1.470			
		Religious	0.564***	0.372	0.854			
	2017	Not religious	3.662***	2.544	5.270			
		Religious	1.992***	1.352	2.935			

Note: The reference category is being male, interviewed in year 2000, not religious. For the list of control variables see note 6. Significance levels: *** 1%; ** 5%; * 10%. In bold confidence intervals of Religious that do not overlap the confidence intervals of Not Religious.

The results of this sort of meta-analysis is summarized in Table 7. The influence of religion on sex was already contained in 2000, as in 32 models out of 61 the NO/NO pair prevails. However,

it is further reduced in 2017, as in 15 models the pair YES/NO prevails. Only in one case (women having the first not complete sexual experience before 16) the influence of religion is more intense in 2017 than in 2000. Finally, only in 13 out of 61 models the influence of religion on sex is statistically significant both in 2000 and in 2017. Overall, the association between religion and sex is stronger for women than for men.

Table 7. Overlapping confidence intervals between religious and non religious respondents. Summary of Table A1, in Appendix, columns 5-8.

2000	YES	NO	NO	YES	Total
2017	NO	YES	NO	YES	
Men	11	0	16	4	31
Women	4	1	16	9	30
Total	15	1	32	13	61

For the opinions of young people on sex a clear trend emerges: religion loses influence with time. At the same time, religion does not influence any opinion in a stronger way in 2017 compared to 2000. Religion influences in a significant way only two opinions both in 2000 and 2017 for both men and women: religious people do not approve homosexual experiences and casual sex. Conversely, differences in agreeing to remain virgin up either to adulthood or marriage lose importance. This also happens for early sexual intercourse but only for men, whereas women giving importance to religion in 2017 still have a lower hazard of approving early intercourse. Finally, religion does not influence at all the approval of partner betrayal, that is viewed negatively by all groups of respondents.

When comparing young students behaviours, the results are even more evident. Among the young men of 2017, there is no statistically significant difference between religious and non-religious students: the differences of 2000 disappeared in 2017. On the other hand, religion influences young women in 2017: religious and not religious women differ for masturbation, having first sexual experiences before 16 and first sexual intercourse before 18, having had three or more sexual partners at interview, having sexual intercourse without loving the partner. However, even for young women the religion has partially lost its ability to influence sexual behaviour: in 2017 – unlike what happened in 2000 – there were no significant differences between religious and non-religious women for having had only one sexual partner in life and having had first sexual intercourse before 16.

We conclude with two further examples, that are useful to better clarify the importance of our results about the weakening relationship between religion and sex. Religious respondents, both male and female, always have lower hazards for smoking marijuana and for getting drunk, and this difference is not narrower in 2017 than in 2000 (data available on request). This means that some behaviors, in this case transgressive behaviors, are still strongly related to the different profiles of religiosity, whereas this is less true in 2017 than in 2000 concerning sex.

5. Conclusions

In the period 2000-2017, among Italian students in their twenties, the link between religiosity and sexuality weakened, in the sense that sexual behavior and opinions on sex of religious and non-religious students are more similar in 2017 than in 2000. This is especially true among men, but also for women the relationship between sex and religion had become weaker. From another point of view, in many aspects of sexuality the gap between religious and non-religious students narrowed during 2000-17, because the detachment from Catholic morality has been most intense among religious students. Therefore, the rapid drop in the adherence to catholic faith does not correspond to a greater adherence to sexual morality proposed by the Church among the few remaining faithful. Consequently, our analyses suggest that in this first part of the 21st century,

among Italian university student, an important step was taken towards “the end of Catholic sexuality”.

These processes – together with the considerable increase in students who declare themselves non-religious – has accelerated the diffusion of sexual attitudes far from Catholic morality. However, in our opinion, it would be superficial to conclude that, in the Italian context, the Catholic way of sexuality have lost all of their relevance.

First, at least for some behaviors and opinions, the difference between people more or less close to catholic religion is still relevant among Italians, especially among women. Young women adhering to catholic faith are less oriented towards hedonistic sexuality, especially outside stable couple relationships.

Second, the sexual behavior of “extreme” groups (respondents who declare themselves non-religious and have not had a religious socialization versus those who go to mass regularly, had a religious socialization and attend religious groups) is very different. The first ones are strongly oriented towards a hedonistic type of sexuality – especially if single – the latter towards a sexuality more connected with affectivity, especially if in a couple. Again, these differences are more pronounced among women, but they are also evident among men.

Third, young people closer to religion declare themselves satisfied with their sexual life to the same extent of those less religious.¹¹ This result could indicate that among the most religious young people, the adherence to a sexuality less oriented in hedonistic way is not experienced as a limit, but contributes to the construction of a subculture that is still vital. This idea is reinforced by some data on couple homogamy drawn from the aforementioned 2006 National Sexuality Survey (Barbagli et al. 2010). Among the cohorts born in 1937-88, attendance at religious rites diminished rapidly. Consequently, we should expect that also couples’ homogamy in respect to the frequency of mass would decrease over time, because for a faithful, if there were no homogamy with respect to religion, the probability of having a non-faithful partner would increase cohort after cohort. This does not happen, meaning a growing tendency for Catholics to look for a partner within their religious circle.¹²

Finally, as we pointed out in the introductory paragraph, some sexual behaviors that are becoming widespread – in particular the growing agreement with the sexual exclusivity in a stable couple – are objectively close to the model of sexual ethics proposed by the Catholic Church. This indicates a progressive prevalence of the affective meaning of sexuality of couples, which however does not exclude a hedonistic component, but limits it within the couple. This does not mean that young Italians – when orienting their sexuality as a couple – are influenced by the teaching of the Pope, or more generally by the doctrine of the Church. However, it is interesting to observe a partial convergence between two *Weltanschauungs* of sexuality – the one proposed by the Catholic Church and the post-modern one – which are usually considered absolutely irreconcilable.

¹¹ Regardless of religiosity, what seems to count most for sexual satisfaction at interview is to be in a couple relationship (data available on request).

¹² In the sample of the 2006 National Sexuality Survey, the proportion of respondents attending mass regularly is: 44% (1937-46 cohort), 35% (1947-56), 32% (1957-66), 27% (1967-76), 17% (1977-88). In the same cohorts, the proportion of respondents attending mass regularly who answer to have had their most important couple relationship with a partner that also attends mass regularly does not vary significantly over time, being 65% (1937-46 cohort), 60% (1947-56), 61% (1957-66), 55% (1967-76), 60% (1977-88). For comparison, we look at a variable that has a similar time trend. The proportion of low educated (8 years of school or less) is: 82% (1937-46 cohort), 73% (1947-56), 59% (1957-66), 46% (1967-76), 38% (1977-88). In the same cohorts, the proportion of low educated who answer to have had their most important couple relationship with a partner that also is low educated decreases strongly over time: 84% (1937-46 cohort), 78% (1947-56), 67% (1957-66), 55% (1967-76), 45% (1977-88). For a more detailed analysis – in the US context – on the subject of homogamy according to religion, see Braithwaite et al. (2015).

References

- Barbagli M. (2016) “Non c’è più religione”, *La voce*, on-line.
- Barbagli M., G. Dalla-Zuanna and F. Garelli (2010) *La sessualità degli italiani*, il Mulino, Bologna.
- Berger P.L. (1969) *A rumor of angels. Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, Doubleday, New York.
- Berman E., Iannaccone L.R., Ragusa G. (2018). From Empty Pews to Empty Cradles: Fertility Decline among European Catholics. *Journal of Demographic Economics*, 84, 149-187.
- Bertone (2010) “Sessualità maschile e femminile, tra convergenze e nuove simmetrie” in M. Barbagli, G. Dalla-Zuanna and F. Garelli (2010): *La sessualità degli italiani*, il Mulino, Bologna, 207-234.
- Berzano L. (2014) *Spiritualità senza Dio?*, Mimesis, Milano.
- Bonarini F. (2013a) “Dimensioni e caratteristiche dei cattolici e del clero in Italia: una analisi delle fonti ufficiali”, *Religioni e Società*, 76, 51-58.
- Bonarini F. (2013b) “I comportamenti religiosi in Italia: una nuova lettura dei dati ufficiali”, *Religioni e Società*, 77, 33-54.
- Braithwaite S.R., Coulson G.L., Spjut K., Dickerson W., Beck A.R., Dougal K., Debenham C., Jones D. (2015). The Influence of Religion on the Partner Selection Strategies of Emerging Adults. *Journal of Family Issues*, 36, 212-231.
- Caltabiano M., G. Dalla-Zuanna and A. Rosina (2006) “Interdependence between sexual debut and church attendance in Italy”, *Demographic Research* 14, 19, 453-484.
- Castegnaro A., M. Chilese, G. Dal Piaz, I. De Sandre, N. Doppio (2010) *C’è campo? Giovani, spiritualità, religione*, Marcianum, Venezia.
- Castiglioni M. (2004). First sexual intercourse and contraceptive use in Italy. In Dalla-Zuanna G., Crisafulli C., *Sexual Behavior of Italian Students*. University of Messina, Messina, 19-40.
- Castiglioni M., Vitali A. (2019). The geography of secularization and reproductive behaviour. Continuity and change in a Catholic setting (North-Eastern Italy, 1946-2008). Paper presented at the 7th EUGEO Congress, Galway, May 15-18.
- Cragun R.T. (2017). The Declining Significance of Religion: Secularization in Ireland. In Breen M.J., *Values and Identities in Europe. Evidence from the European Social Survey*, 17-35. Taylor and Francis Group, London and New York.
- Dalla-Zuanna G. and G. Ronzoni (2003) *Meno preti, quale chiesa? Per non abbandonare le parrocchie*, Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna.
- Dalla-Zuanna G., A. De Rose and F. Racioppi (2005) “Low fertility and limited diffusion of modern contraception in Italy during the second half of the twentieth Century”, *Journal of Population Research*, 22, 1, 21-48.
- Dalla-Zuanna G. (2011) “Tacit Consent. The Church and the Birth Control in Northern Italy”, *Population and Development Review*, 37, 2, 361-374.
- Dalla-Zuanna G., Caltabiano M., Minello A., Vignoli D. (2019). Catching up! The sexual opinions and behaviour of Italian students (2000-2017). DISIA Working Papers Series no. 02/2019. Università di Firenze, Firenze.
- DeLamater J. (1981) “The social control of sexuality”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 7, 263-290.
- Denissenko M., Dalla Zuanna G., Guerra D. (1999). Sexual Behaviour and Attitudes of Students in the Moscow State University. *European Journal of Population*, 15, 279-304.
- Diotallevi L. (ed.) (2005) *La parabola del clero. Uno sguardo socio-demografico sui sacerdoti diocesani in Italia*, Edizioni Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Torino.

- Garelli 2010 “Religione e sessualità” in M. Barbagli, G. Dalla-Zuanna and F. Garelli (2010): *La sessualità degli italiani*, il Mulino, Bologna, 253-290.
- Garelli F. (2013) “Flexible Catholicism, Religion and the Church: The Italian Case”, *Religions*4(1), 1-13.
- Garelli F. (2016) *Piccoli atei crescono. Davvero una generazione senza Dio?*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
- Guetto R., Luijkx R., Scherer S. (2015). Religiosity, gender attitudes and women’s labour market participation and fertility decisions in Europe. *Acta Sociologica*, 58, 155-172.
- Herzer D. (2019). A Note on the Effect of Religiosity on Fertility. *Demography*, 56, 991-998.
- Impicciatore R. and F.C. Billari (2012) “Secularization, Union Formation Practices, and Marital Stability: Evidence from Italy”, *European Journal of Population* 28, 2, 119-138.
- Istat (2016). Matrimoni, separazioni e divorzi. Anno 2015. Statistiche Report. Istat, Rome. <https://www.istat.it/it/files/2016/11/matrimoni-separazioni-divorzi-2015.pdf>
- Istituto Toniolo (2014) *La condizione giovanile in Italia. Rapporto Giovani 2014*, il Mulino, Bologna.
- Istituto Toniolo (2015) *La condizione giovanile in Italia. Rapporto Giovani 2015*, il Mulino, Bologna.
- James-Hawkins L. (2019). Adolescent sexual norms and college sexual experiences: Do high school norms influence college behavior? *Advances in Life Course Research*, 39, 61-76.
- Kimmel, M. (2004). Masculinity as homophobia: Fear, shame, and silence in the construction of gender identity. In Brod H., Kaufman M. (Eds.), *Theorizing masculinities*, 119–141. SAGE, Thousand Oaks.
- Kontula O. (2004). Reproductive health behaviour of young Europeans. Volume 2: The role of education and information. *Population Studies* No. 45. Council of Europe Publishing. Council of Europe. Strasbourg 2004.
- Kontula O. (2009) *Between Sexual Desire and Reality. The Evolution of Sex in Finland*, Publications of the Population Research Institute, D49, Helsinki.
- Livi-Bacci M. (1977). *A History of Italian Fertility during the Last Two Centuries*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- McQuillan K. (2004) “When Does Religion Influence Fertility?”, *Population and Development Review*, 30, 1, 25-56.
- Mercer C.H., C. Tanton, P. Prah, B. Erens, P. Sonnenberg, S. Clifton, W. Macdowall, R. Lewis, N. Field, J. Datta, A.J. Copas, A. Phelps, K. Wellings, A.M. Johnson (2013). Changes in sexual attitudes and lifestyles in Britain through the life course and over time: findings from the National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal). *The Lancet*, 382, 1781-1794.
- Moon J.W., Krems J.A., Cohen A.B., Kenrick D.T. (2019). Is Nothing Sacred? Religion, Sex, and Reproductive Strategies. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28, 361-365.
- Pace E. (2015) *Una religiosità senza religioni. Spirito, mente e corpo nella cultura olistica contemporanea*, Guida, Napoli.
- Perelli-Harris B., Bernardi L. (2015). Exploring social norms around cohabitation: The life course, individualization, and culture. Introduction to Special Collection: “Focus on Partnerships: Discourses on cohabitation and marriage throughout Europe and Australia *Demographic Research*, 33, 701-732.
- Perry S.L., Whitehead A.L. (2019). Only Bad for Believers? Religion, Pornography Use, and Sexual Satisfaction Among American Men. *Journal of Sex Research*, 56, 50-61.
- Ruspini (2019) “Introduzione. La fede in cammino dei Millennials”, in E. Ruspini and A. Nesti (eds.) “L’esperienza religiosa della Generazione Millennial: la ricerca nazionale «Giovani e Religione»“, *Religioni e Società*, 93, 14-20.
- Ruspini E. and A. Nesti (eds.) (2019) “L’esperienza religiosa della Generazione Millennial: la ricerca nazionale «Giovani e Religione»“, *Religioni e Società*, 93.

Salvini S. and D. Vignoli (2014) “Religion and union formation in Italy: Catholic precepts, social pressure, and tradition”, *Demographic Research*, 31, 35, 1079-1106.

Ufficio Centrale di Statistica della Chiesa (2019) *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae 2017*, Tipografia Vaticana, Roma.

Ufficio Centrale di Statistica della Chiesa (2019b) *Annuario Pontificio 2019*, Tipografia Vaticana, Roma.

Westoff C.F. and E.F. Jones (1979) “The end of “Catholic” fertility”, *Demography*, 16, 2, 209-217.

Whitbeck L.B., Yoder K.A., Hoyt D.R., Conger R.D. (1999). Early Adolescent Sexual Activity: A Developmental Study. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 61, 934-946.

Appendix

Table A1. Sexual opinions and behaviors (%); significance at 5% level of the statistical relationship with religiosity (logistic models). Gender and year.

	%				<i>Significant statistical connection with religiosity</i>			
	Men		Woman		Men		Woman	
	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017	2000	2017
<i>Opinions (I agree with....)</i>								
A young men has a very early intercourse	50.2	52.2	13.7	21.3	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
A young women has a very early intercourse	28.8	27.4	8.5	13.6	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
A young men has an “escapade” in a couple relationship	26.0	17.9	2.4	2.9	Yes	No	No	No
A young women has an “escapade” in a couple relationship	13.0	9.9	4.1	3.8	No	No	No	No
Casual sex for a young men without a stable partner	67.4	71.5	21.8	24.3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Casual sex for a young women without a stable partner	46.1	53.3	16.1	30.5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
A young men remain virgin at an advanced aged	35.6	38.1	51.9	48.3	Yes	No	No	No
A young women remain virgin at an advanced aged	43.6	44.8	59.0	54.2	Yes	No	No	No
A young men remain virgin until marriage	26.5	21.7	37.0	35.4	Yes	No	Yes	No
A young women remain virgin until marriage	36.0	25.7	52.9	38.5	Yes	No	Yes	No
A young men has homosexual intercourse	19.0	42.4	28.1	69.5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
A young women has homosexual intercourse	31.5	59.5	27.0	66.7	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Behaviors (all respondents)</i>								
Talking about sex with friends (Often or very often)	67.1	67.0	48.3	46.3	No	No	No	No
Masturbating (at least sometimes)	n.a.	87.7	n.a.	34.6	-	No	-	Yes
Homosexual experiences at least once in life	6.4	7.2	4.3	14.9	No	No	No	No
Homosexual attraction at least once in life	n.a.	5.7	n.a.	10.4	-	No	-	No
Homosexual or bisexual orientation	n.a.	3.0	n.a.	3.7	-	No	-	No
Visiting porno web sites (Often or very often)	10.4	39.5	0.4	2.8	Yes	No	No	No
Exchanging sexual material by mobile (Often or very often)	n.a.	18.4	n.a.	3.2	-	No	-	No
Feeling to be at risk for HIV (Yes)	32.1	37.8	24.2	34.3	Yes	No	No	No
Had a sexual transmitted disease (At least once)	4.2	7.0	6.3	11.6	No	No	No	No
Had first sexual intercourse before the 18 th birthday	35.8	50.1	33.1	49.9	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Had first sexual intercourse before 16 th birthday	12.5	18.6	9.1	18.9	No	No	Yes	No
Had first not complete sexual experiences before 16 th birthday	52.5	53.2	42.1	46.3	Yes	No	No	Yes
Had first steady couple relationship before 16 th birthday	44.8	47.5	51.6	52.6	No	No	No	No
<i>Behaviors (Respondents who had sexual intercourse)</i>								
Condom, pill or IUD at first intercourse	74.6	79.9	65.2	78.5	No	No	No	No
Casual partner at first intercourse	35.5	29.4	9.1	11.8	No	No	No	No
Female partner proposed to have intercourse	17.6	13.7	9.8	6.6	No	No	No	No
Having had only one sexual partner in life	38.7	32.2	58.2	42.3	No	No	Yes	No
Having had at least three sexual partner in life	30.7	37.3	12.9	23.8	No	No	Yes	Yes
Paid to have intercourse	8.2	11.6	0.3	0.4	No	No	n.a.	n.a.
Sex once a month or less (during the last three months)	43.8	44.8	29.4	30.9	No	No	No	No
Sex 2-3 times a week or more (during the last three months)	27.6	25.9	30.7	34.0	No	No	No	No
Had sexual intercourse without loving partner (at least once)	47.4	52.7	14.9	27.6	No	No	Yes	Yes
Betrayed the partner (at least once)	27.2	22.7	12.1	12.7	No	No	No	No

n.a.: not available