

Study On Perceptions of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, and Priesthood

PRESENTED BY
International Institute for Culture



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Key Findings and Insights

Objectives

The International Institute for Culture (IIC), a nonprofit based in Philadelphia, conducted a survey to better understand public perceptions of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, and the Catholic priesthood in the United States. The study was prompted by troubling trends in Catholic participation, such as a decline in young men entering seminaries, reduced Mass attendance, and a shortage of priests, which has led to parish closures and mergers. By exploring these perceptions, the IIC aims to uncover root causes and develop strategies to address these concerns.

To achieve this, the survey analyzed responses across key demographic categories, including **age, gender, religious affiliation, income, and geographic region**, to identify significant differences. Additionally, special attention was given to understanding trends among **Catholics themselves**, as distinct from the views of non-Catholics.

Survey Methodology

- **Survey Period:** October 2024
- **Method:** Online survey
- **Respondents:** 1,200 adults across the United States
- **Demographics:** Representing a diverse range of religious affiliations and non-affiliation, age groups (18+), and geographic regions in the US.

Key Findings and Trends

1. Perceptions of the Catholic Church

- **Positive Views:**
 - Middle Atlantic respondents exhibited the highest favorability, with 75% holding positive opinions.
 - High-income respondents ($\geq \$100,000$) were more likely to have positive views (67%) compared to lower-income groups (52%).

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- **Negative Views:**

- Mountain Region and East North Central showed the most negative perceptions.
- Respondents 18-29 and over 60 had the strongest negative views.

2. Perceptions of Pope Francis

- **Favorability:**

- Respondents in the Middle Atlantic region viewed Pope Francis most favorably (72% positive), followed by West South Center.
- High-income respondents ($\geq \$100,000$) showed more positive views (70%).
- Respondents ages 45-60 had the most favorable opinion of all age groups.

- **Negativity:**

- Negative views peaked in the Mountain Region (19%) and among younger adults, reflecting a critical stance toward Church leadership.
- Income respondents ($< \$100,000$) showed more negative views than their counterparts, with those earning \$50,000-\$74,999 having the strongest negative views.

3. Perceptions of Catholic Priests

- **Positive Associations:**

- Middle Atlantic respondents once again led in positive opinions, with 68% favorability.
- Positive adjectives like "trustworthy" and "kind" were more often associated by older and higher-income respondents.

- **Negative Associations:**

- Among young adults (18-29 years), priests were frequently associated with terms like "judgmental" and "predatory," contributing to significant negativity.
- Lower-income respondents and the Mountain Region also reflected stronger negative sentiments.

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- **Interaction Rates:**

- Regions and demographics with fewer interactions with priests (e.g., **Mountain Region, low-income groups**) were more likely to express negative or neutral views.

4. Trends by Age

- **Young Adults (18-29 years):**

- This group exhibited the most critical views of Catholic priests, with **29%** describing priests negatively.
- Neutrality was also common, signaling disengagement or indifference.

- **Older Adults (>60 years):**

- Generally favorable across all metrics, with higher trust in the Church, Pope Francis, and priests.

5. Geographic Trends

- **Middle Atlantic Region:**

- The most favorable across all metrics, likely due to higher interaction rates and cultural engagement.

- **Mountain Region:**

- Exhibited the most neutrality and negativity, especially toward Catholic priests and Pope Francis.

6. Income Trends

- **Higher-Income Respondents:**

- Displayed consistently higher favorability toward the Church, Pope Francis, and priests.

- **Lower-Income Respondents:**

- More likely to express neutrality or negative views, often tied to limited interaction with priests.

7. Trends Among Catholics

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- Catholic respondents were significantly more favorable toward the Church, Pope Francis, and priests compared to non-Catholics.
- Among Catholics, **younger respondents** (18-29) still exhibited more critical views, suggesting the influence of broader cultural perceptions.

8. General Favorability Trends

- The survey highlights a consistent pattern where Pope Francis is viewed more favorably than the Catholic Church, which in turn is seen more positively than Catholic priests.
- This trend may reflect Pope Francis's global image as a reformer and compassionate leader, contrasted with the broader challenges faced by the Church and its clergy in public perception.
- This gap in perceptions emphasizes the need to address institutional and individual trust issues to bridge the divide.

Implications and Observations

1. Negative Perceptions Among Young Adults

The survey reveals that **young adults** hold the most critical views of Catholic priests, with significant associations to negative adjectives. This perception may contribute to challenges in encouraging vocations and fostering engagement with the Church. Neutrality among younger respondents also indicates a level of disengagement that could be further explored. Data showed nearly 1 in 3 non-Catholic young adults (18-29 years) associate the terms “predatory” and “untrustworthy” with Catholic priests, very likely contributing toward young men not seeking to enter Catholic seminaries.

2. Regional and Demographic Differences

Regions such as the **Mountain Region** exhibited higher neutrality and negativity across various perceptions, particularly toward Catholic priests and Pope Francis. Similarly, respondents from **lower-income communities** were more likely to hold neutral or negative views. These patterns suggest that regional and socioeconomic factors play a role in shaping attitudes.

3. Positive Trends in the Middle Atlantic Region

The **Middle Atlantic region** displayed the most favorable views of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, and Catholic priests. High interaction rates and cultural factors likely contribute to this

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positivity, providing a model for understanding how engagement can improve perceptions elsewhere.

4. Fewer Interactions with Priests

The survey asked respondents whether they had ever met a priest. Over 80% of those aged 45 and older confirmed they had. However, among respondents aged 18-29, 50% reported they either had not met a priest or were unsure. While the decline in the number of priests in the US may contribute to this trend, it does not fully explain such a dramatic generational shift. It may also reflect changes in how priests engage with the broader culture or a decrease in their visibility, such as wearing clerical attire in public.

Considering that half of this younger demographic also holds the strongest negative views of priests, the lack of in-person interactions may be a significant factor in perpetuating these views. Further research is needed to explore whether this trend is influenced more by cultural changes, shifts in the role of priests, or other underlying causes.

IIC Response

In response to the survey findings, the International Institute for Culture is formulating a comprehensive plan to address the challenges identified. This strategy integrates the current survey data with insights from a national survey of Vocations Directors and dialogues with US leaders focused on vocations. The initial phase of this initiative is the launch of ThankAPriest.com, a program aimed at fostering appreciation and support for priests, thereby addressing some of the concerns highlighted in the survey.

Conclusion

The study highlights critical challenges for the Catholic Church, especially in overcoming negative perceptions held by younger generations. Despite these obstacles, there is a clear path for growth by fostering trust through authentic engagement, openness, and compelling narratives. The IIC remains committed to addressing these challenges and fostering a renewed culture of appreciation for the priesthood.

For more information about this survey or the Thank A Priest initiative, please contact the International Institute for Culture at iiculture.org.

About the International Institute for Culture

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The International Institute for Culture, founded in 1989 and based in Philadelphia, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering international understanding and enriching lives through cultural engagement. The IIC promotes initiatives that preserve and share Catholic traditions while addressing challenges facing the faithful in the modern world.

Under the leadership of its president, Dr. John M. Haas, who has taught in Catholic seminaries for over four decades, the IIC offers a wide range of programs for priests, seminarians, and Catholic laity. These include educational lectures, language courses, art exhibits, musical performances, and travel excursions, all designed to inspire individuals and connect faith, culture, and community.