

Observations from the 2023-24 Religious Landscape Study

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Introduction

On February 26, 2025 the Pew Research Center published the findings of their 2023-24 Religious Landscape Study in their report *[Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off](#)*.² (Hereafter I will simply cite this document as the “report.” I will also cite the *2023-2024 Religious Landscape Study* by the Pew Research Center simply as the “study.”) Many might have already heard the headline finding: the decline of Christianity has leveled off. Various traditional media groups have reported on this particular finding.³ And while it is true

¹ Published at verbumcaro.com on August 11, 2025.

² They also provide a good interactive data viewing tool at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/>. All the data reported through this article comes from: Religious Landscape Study of U.S. adults conducted July 17, 2023-March 4, 2024. The data in this most recent study was collected differently from past studies and so the authors provide the following warning when comparing this data to previous reports, “The 2023-24 RLS was conducted mainly online and on paper, while the earlier surveys were done by telephone. This ‘mode shift’ complicates trend analysis, but the 2023-24 results shown here can be cautiously compared with the earlier results.” As such I will not make many historical comparisons beyond what the authors of the report themselves make.

³ A few examples of coverage upon this report from other news sources: Jessica Grose, “The Share of Religious Americans Will Continue to Decline,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/12/opinion/decline-religion-america.html>; Ruth Graham, “Christianity’s Decline in U.S. Appears to Have Halted, Major Study Shows,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/26/us/christianity-us-religious-study-pew.html>; Liam Adam, “Christianity’s decline gets more complicated, new Pew religion study finds,” *USA Today*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2025/02/26/christianity-us-decline-pew-religion-census/80487678007/>; Alexander Hall, “New poll finds decline of Christianity has ‘leveled off’ in America,” *Fox News*, March 2, 2025, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/new-poll-finds-decline-christianity-has-leveled-off-america>;

that the demographics of Christianity have stabilized, the results of the study have more to say than this simple fact. As several have already commented, the broad religious landscape is anything but stable if even the measure of Christians as a percentage of the American population has stabilized for the time being.

In this essay I will look at some other general findings of the study and then I will look at particular findings that are relevant for pastoral planning concerning the continuation of religious practice by children into adulthood. I will look at the role of religion in the family, the effect of frequency of participation in religious services, and finally the effect of participation in religious education programs. As parishes and ecclesial institutions are growing more strained in their available resources, there is great value in reflecting upon how we can get the most results out of each “unit” of effort put into the process of handing on our religion to the future generations.

But first a word on the report and study itself. The study consists of the data, the questionnaire completed by the participants, and the statistical analysis done by Pew Research. The report is a summary analysis of that information. In this article all the data and statistics are from the study and various quotes come from the report (as indicated by the citations). The report generally makes comparisons between 2007 and 2025 (an 18-year period). I retained this temporal range unless I noted otherwise. The data in this study comes from self-reported answers of adults. And so, the data tells us how Americans understand themselves in relationship to religion. It does not tell us how their views actually relate to the doctrines of a particular religion.

Finally, a note on causation versus correlation. This study does not look for causal relationships, and so the relationships in the reported data are at best correlations. Nevertheless, when (as we will see) there are certain correlations that diverge from the general population correlations that implies there is some causal component in the divergent correlation, otherwise there would be no divergence. What we cannot say is how strong the causal link is, or the direction of causality.

General Results

The study found that there has been a broad leveling out of individuals that identify as Christian. Between 60% and 64% of American adults since 2019 have identified as Christians which is a drop of 14-18% from 78% in 2007. 40% of American adults belong to one of the Protestant denominations, 19% are Catholic, and the other roughly 3% belong to all other

Doug Cunningham, “Pew polling shows years of U.S. Christianity decline slowing, possibly stabilizing,” *MSN*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/wellness/pew-polling-shows-years-of-u-s-christianity-decline-slowing-possibly-stabilizing/ar-AA1zQWWg>; Daniel Payne, “Yearslong decline in Christianity ‘leveling off’ in U.S., Pew survey shows,” *Catholic News Agency*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/262443/years-long-decline-in-christianity-leveling-off-in-us-pew-survey-shows>.

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Christian groups. Though our numbers (Catholics) are down since 2007, our share of the population “has been stable since 2014, with only small fluctuations in our [Pew Research] annual surveys.” (Report)

The Catholic Church has a large percentage of immigrants with 29% of her members having been born outside of the country and another 14% who were born in America but have at least one parent who was born outside of America. Therefore, a total of 43% of Catholics in America are either first or second-generation immigrants (compared to just 17% among Protestants). These immigrants have largely supplemented the number of Catholics who are leaving the Church and so contributed to our relative stability as a percentage of population. Bracketing the immigrant inflow, for every one person that joins the Church from another religious group another 8.4 Catholics leave the Church.⁴ The *completed fertility rate* (defined in the report as the average number of children ever born to adults ages 40-59) of Catholic’s is 2.2 (which is baseline population replacement rate). These two facts could indicate that without Catholic immigrants over the past decade, we could have already gone off the demographic cliff by this point in time.

This large immigrant presence in the local Church though is not new. We have traditionally been an immigrant community. Many have seen these peoples as the hope which will carry the Church in America forward into the future as they integrate into the broader Church in America. However, “more broadly, the survey finds that the long-term decline in Christianity and growth of the religiously unaffiliated population is evident among immigrants, second-generation respondents ... and people whose families have been in the U.S. for three generations or more.” (Report) And so even though these new communities are certainly adding to the life of the Church presently, they are not remaining Catholic, and they quickly follow the demographic trends of all other groups. As such immigration *alone* cannot fix our forthcoming demographic problems but only delay the problem.

To begin to improve the situation we need to focus on how we can better retain the youth in our communities. Overall, we are still losing the youth; however, we are not losing them more quickly than we were in past generations. To improve our prospects, we will need to begin to gain ground on the cohorts between 18-44 and not simply keep them from getting worse. There are several challenges to this highlighted by the report. The first is that “since 2020, however, our surveys indicate that the religiousness of most birth cohorts has remained relatively stable.” (Report) People are not coming back broadly speaking as they get older. “40% of U.S. adults say they attend religious services less often today than they did as children. Just 5% say they attend religious services *more* often today than they did as kids. And 32% of U.S. adults say religion is

⁴ This year (2025) reports across the country saw an increase in Christian Initiations among adults. The numbers though hopeful would not change the ratio from the report too much. Further it is too early to detect if this is a trend or not of increased conversions to the faith.

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less important to them today than it was to their families when they were growing up.” (Report, emphasis in original) No matter what the conventional wisdom may say, across all generations in America, no generation is increasing in religious practice, and only a small portion of Americans increase their religious practice as they age.⁵

This last fact is particularly problematic since each cohort is less religious than the preceding generation and practiced religion less as a child. Religious practice as a child is the greatest indication for future religious practice. (See further discussion of this below.) Meaning, there is a positive feedback loop creating more irreligiosity in Americans which has been active in *every single generation alive*. The only exception to generations becoming less religious than previous generations is with the two youngest cohorts (18-24 and 24-34) who both are roughly as religious (or irreligious) as each other.

These two youngest groups sit at 51% and 45% Christian, while the oldest two cohorts sit at 80% and 79%. And so, it is expected that if the youngest cohorts remain stable in their association with Christianity, over the next decades we will begin to decline once more towards the 50% mark.

The second major problem is that those who become a “none” (defined by the report as those with no particular religious affiliation, but different from atheists and agnostics) is more “sticky” than religious affiliation. Stickiness is defined as “the persistence of a high level of religiousness from childhood into adulthood.” (Report) Stickiness “appears to be declining [among religions], while the stickiness of a nonreligious upbringing seems to be increasing.” (Report) To show this the reports states:

among the youngest U.S. adults in the survey (now ages 18 to 24), just 28% of those raised in highly religious homes are, today, highly religious themselves. Meanwhile, 76% of young adults who grew up rarely or never attending services, in families in which religion was unimportant, still say they do not attend religious services and that religion is not important to them. In other words, a highly religious upbringing has been much less persistent (or “sticky”) than a nonreligious upbringing so far in the lifetimes of the youngest U.S. adults. (Report)

This fact alone creates major pressures on the Church since if American Catholics only have 2.2 children and assuming all of those families were “highly religious” (which is not the case), then our retained birth rate is only 0.6, or only one child out of every two families in our parishes today will be highly religious once they grow up.

Here though it is important to note what Americans are “becoming.” In the terms of the study, we are becoming less religious but more spiritual. Categorically this is shown by the

⁵ It must be acknowledged that there are certainly individual parishes in America that are growing and certain dioceses too. However, it appears these phenomena stem more from people self-selecting into these locations for various reasons. Meaning the pool of Catholics is not broadly growing, it is mostly redistributing in some areas.

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increase in the Nones since Americans largely are not becoming atheists (5% today with a 3% growth) nor agnostics (6% today with 4% growth). Nones now make up 19% of America (7% growth).

Further religion in the study largely means *institutional* religion, since what the study identifies as spiritual beliefs (and which they separate from religious beliefs) are propositions that theologians would call theological or religious. From the report we find:

- 86% believe people have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body.
- 83% believe in God or a universal spirit.
- 79% believe there is something spiritual beyond the natural world, even if we cannot see it.
- 70% believe in an afterlife (heaven, hell, or both).
- 92% believe one or more of the above.

Technically speaking these are truths pertaining to religion or theology. So, we (Americans) are still a deeply religious people and have a broadly theological and transcendent metaphysical world view. And there is stability across generations and within generations across time in the percentage of those who hold these beliefs. What has happened is the separation of a corporate or communal aspect of religion from these theological realities.

Not only are these beliefs stable, but unlike the positive feedback loop causing irreligiosity, “Americans of all ages are more likely to say their spirituality has grown stronger than to say it has weakened.” (Report) Meaning there is an existing feedback loop leading to stronger spirituality already in effect.

This distinction between institutional religion and what we can call natural religion can be seen in the table below:

Importance of religion in one's life among U.S. adults. % of U.S. adults who say religion is ...				
	Very important	Somewhat important	Not too/ Not at all important	No answer
Catholics	44%	38%	17%	<1%
Christians	55%	31%	13%	1%
Pop (2023-24)	38%	26%	35%	1%
Pop (2014)	53%	24%	22%	1%
Pop (2007)	56%	26%	16%	1%

Even though 92% of American hold religious beliefs, only 65% think that there is any importance to (institutional) religion. This is what you would expect to find as the Nones increased and natural religion remained the same. Among Catholics it is better where 82% think

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that religion is at least Somewhat Important, which given the nature of our religion we would expect our members to see value in institutional religion.

With this overview of the general situation, we will now look at how specific aspects of one's upbringing affect these trends.

Role of Religion in the Family

“The survey shows that Americans' current religious identities, beliefs and practices are strongly linked with their upbringing. People who say they were raised in religious homes are much more likely to be religious as adults.” (Report) This has long been known among sociological studies. And we should expect that, since the family is the primary place in which the handing on (*tradere*) of values happens. But it is not a one-to-one causal link. Society at large also factors into the values which a person holds. This explains why there is a positive feedback loop producing irreligiosity. Our society has largely abandoned the Judeo-Christian worldview, and so even in a very religious household the children do not persevere in their religious upbringing 100% of the time as we saw early since there is a competing worldview presented by society. Nevertheless, focusing on strengthening families and empowering them to hand on the faith to their children is crucial in the propagation of our religion.

Importance of religion to your family when growing up among U.S. adults % of U.S. adults who say when growing up, religion to their family was ...				
	Very important	Somewhat important	Not too/ Not at all important	No answer
Catholics	57%	32%	10%	1%
Christians	54%	31%	15%	1%
Pop	45%	31%	23%	1%

Happily, among American Catholics 89% said religion was at least somewhat important while growing up. We are doing better in this regard relative to other Christians and society at large. Ideally, we would move more of those in the Somewhat Important category to Very Important. The Somewhat Important group is probably a mixture of Christmas/Easter Catholics, those families that are in religious education but do not regularly go to Mass, and those parishioners that are associated with the parish but one does not see regularly. Finding ways to connect them to the parish and community while also showing how our religion can answer the important questions in life could be useful in moving these families towards the Very Important category. The Not too/ Not at all Important category is probably hard (if not impossible) to reach out to in most parish settings, since these Catholic families probably hardly if ever show up at the parish and do not follow any of our standard modes of communications (i.e., they are not picking up bulletins nor signed up for the parish's Flocknotes). Simply having a conversation with them presents a challenge.

Effect of Frequency of Participation in Religious Services

Personal importance of religion when growing up among U.S. adults % of U.S. adults who say when growing up, religion was ...				
	Very important	Somewhat important	Not too/ Not at all important	No answer
Catholics	38%	41%	20%	<1%
Christians	38%	39%	22%	1%
Pop	29%	34%	36%	1%

Despite the fact the religion was at least somewhat important at home 89% of the time, 79% of Catholics said it was at least somewhat important to them personally growing up. The 100% increase in the Not too/Not at all Important category can be from a few reasons. First, Christianity is a “religion for adults,” meaning the profound meaning of sin and redemption is understood in greater clarity as an adult. That is not to say children do not understand anything of sin and redemption, but simply to say that the profundity of Christianity often does not become clear until later in life. As a result, we should expect to see some ambiguity of the importance of Christianity to a child.

The next reason is that for many (most?) children Catholicism is simply going to Mass and/or religious education. The celebration of Mass is at times unfortunately not the most inspiring it could be in places and religious education programs often do not have sufficient funding nor staffing (both paid and volunteer) to provide a compelling experience. And in both cases I do not mean that we need more “children's liturgies” which entertain children nor more “relevant” religious education programming (through in some cases either may be helpful). Instead, I simply mean that from the perspective of a child, they can at times struggle to see their place within the religious environment of our parishes.

Nevertheless, a strong majority of American Catholics did see at least some importance in religion as a child. It would seem beneficial to target the Somewhat Important category since these are most likely already in some form of religious education, and so we are literally able to talk and work with them. Finding ways to show how the Gospel answers the questions of life that they have as children and handing on a Catholic worldview is important here.

Effect of Frequency of Participation in Religious Services

“People who grew up attending religious services regularly (at least once a month) are more than twice as likely as those who *didn't* grow up attending services regularly to say they now attend religious services at least monthly.” (Report, emphasis in original) This is the elephant in the room of parish *praxis*. Regular religious attendance as defined by the study is certainly laxer than our expectation of weekly attendance; yet from common pastoral experience

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seeing a family at Mass at least once a month certainly does make them “regular” compared to many of our other families in the parish. Nevertheless, the fact that *merely* going to Mass⁶ once a month as a child *doubles* the rate at which they attend Mass as an adult is important. And yet few parishes have *any* requirement for Mass attendance for their families in religious education (though this is certainly changing in many locations). Based upon this statistical relationship alone, expecting families to go to Mass at least once a month outside of Christmas and Easter (for a grand total of fourteen times a year) could have a marked effect upon our retention rate.

Here it is important to recall our note on causation and correlation at the start of this essay. It is reasonable to suppose that part of the causal effect of this relationship is that families that go to Mass at least once a month (without being incentivized) also take religion more seriously, and families taking religion seriously is the single largest determining factor of a child continuing in their religion as we saw above. If we incentivize families to go to Mass more frequently that may weaken the correlation between regular Mass attendance and future Mass attendance. Conversely by requiring regular Mass attendance that may indicate to the child (and families as a whole) that this is something important and so this statistic may hold.

Continuing, this increase of future participation in one’s religion only increases with the frequency of Mass attendance. “74% of people who were raised in a religion and grew up attending weekly religious services in a family in which religion was very important still identify with their childhood religion today.” (Report) This is on the one hand unsurprising. This correlation is combining the two primary indicators of future participation in religion (importance of religion at home growing up and regular attendance in religious services), and found a stronger correlation than either by themselves. But on the other hand, compare this to what we saw earlier “28% of those raised in highly religious homes are, today, highly religious themselves.” (Report) These are not one-to-one comparisons, but clearly, weekly Mass attendance has an important effect upon long term retention which is greater than monthly attendance.

Conversely “among people who were raised in a religion but grew up seldom or never attending religious services – and in a family in which religion was not too important or not at all important – fewer than half still identify with their childhood religion. Instead, most now say they have no religion (40%) or identify with a religion different from the one in which they were raised (16%).” (Report) And this is what we would expect to find.

⁶ The report does not further delineate the effect of religious service attendance as a child and as an adult based upon religious affiliation. And so, we will assume that the relationship holds the same for Catholics as others.

Effect of Participation in Religious Education Programs

The report unfortunately does not analyze the long-term effects of religious education upon religious identification as an adult. Instead, the report uses religious education to classify how religious a person's upbringing was. The more years of religious education the more religious the upbringing was. And so, we can get an intuitive feeling from the statistics above for the effect of religious education. The more religious education a child received, the more important religion was as a child, and so therefore the more likely the child is to persist in the faith. This relationship then is multiplied by participation in Mass as already noted.

Going beyond the report⁷ in this article we will limit ourselves to simply noting the below statistic for participation of Catholics in religious education:

Attended Sunday school, CCD, or some other form of religious education for...			
1-3 Years	4-6 Years	7+ Years	Did not attend
26%	15%	21%	37%

The “1-3 Years” category would clearly map to those families who are only in religious education to receive the sacraments. “7+ Years” would be the children who completed an entire religious education program starting in first grade all the way through confirmation. The “4-6 Years” group are those children that all Parish Catechetical Leaders know quite well as they figure out how to “catch” these kids up and fit them into their religious education program. The “Did not attend” category is interesting because this is the plurality of Catholic children. Certainly, a majority of our children (63%) receive some religious education, but the fact that over a third receive none presents acute challenges in handing on the faith to the next generations and we should expect less than half of them to identify as Catholic as adults.

Conclusions

The general trends of the study present a challenging future for the Church in America despite the relative stability that we have “enjoyed” for the past decade. Immigrants have provided a stable population floor in the face of the Church hemorrhaging “native-born” Catholics. Troubling thought those same immigrants lose the faith as quickly as everyone else once they are established in America and so we still face the demographic cliff, it is just uncertain how many years we have before it arrives.

In the face of this we largely do not need to convince people of spiritual realities, people are not atheists (properly speaking). America is still quite religious; she is just abandoning

⁷ An enterprising individual can certainly do further analysis themselves by downloading the data itself and doing further statistical analysis.

institutional religions. This means that when we go out to engage with society our task is not to convince them to have a theological world view, but instead our task is to present the Catholic world view as one which can best give meaning to what they already believe.

Among those who are Catholic, the practice of religion in the family is the most important determinate for long-term retention of the current generation. The most important way that a family practices religion is regular attendance in religious services. Yes, religious education contributed, and it is uncertain why the report did not look at its long-term effects. However, it is clear that even basic (monthly) Mass attendance has a profound effect on long-term religious practice.

This is not a simple call to get “butts” in pews, we have enough experience to know that such an approach does not work when separated from other initiatives. Presumably, the cause of higher retention rates is a combination of Mass itself with the intentionality motivating Mass attendance. Nevertheless, even if regular Mass attendance is not sufficient for long-term retention, the report is further proof for what we have always known, that regular Mass attendance is *necessary* (though not sufficient). Unfortunately for too many places, when we are honest in how we present our religious education programs, Mass is not necessary. Rarely is a child not advanced through religious education based upon Mass attendance. Rarely is a child not confirmed because of Mass attendance. When push comes to shove, our policy implementations say, “Mass is not necessary.” This point requires deep reflection.

Finally, a point we have not mentioned thus far is the role of wonder at creation and an experience of transcendence in a person’s life. Both are identified by the report as key criteria for those whose spirituality has increased. “The survey finds that Americans who say their spirituality has increased are more likely than other adults (especially those who say their spirituality has declined) to say they regularly feel *awe at nature’s beauty*, feel a sense of spiritual peace, and *experience the presence of something from beyond this world*.” (Report, emphasis added) Many (for example Hans Urs Von Balthasar, Pope Benedict XVI, and Bishop Robert Barron) have spoken much about beauty and its role in the “New Evangelization.” They knew intuitively what this study has found empirically: beauty causes wonder which leads to transcendence which opens us to the divine.

Creation is the first revelation of God. It is the means by which the Lord first encountered humanity. The beauty of creation separates us from the manufactured environment to which we have become so accustomed. Creation opens us to a reality before ourselves, beyond our products and control. It leads us to transcendence, to the recognition of something beyond ourselves, which in turn makes space for God to speak to us.

This importance of wonder and transcendence connects to the Catholic religion in a keyway: the Liturgy. The Liturgy mediates the reentrance of the Paschal Mystery from eternity into our finite existence in the here and now. Through the sacred signs and rites creation literally opens into the eternity of Christ. It is essentially *transcendent* and ought to inspire wonder. And

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yet, when we survey our liturgical environments and celebrations, how many inspire wonder or help facilitate the experience of transcendence? The Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian Life.”⁸ Summits are heights that draw our gaze upwards and inspire wonder. To mount them requires *transcendence*, meaning moving beyond our present place in life. As we move to call all to Christ every more fully, as we strive to hand on our religion more successfully to the future generation, how can we place the Eucharist more clearly as the summit to which we strive? For this summit is the light shining in the darkness inspiring wonder as we draw close to our Lord who has come so close to us.

⁸ *Lumen Gentium* 11, and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1324.