

Catholic Trends/Summer (#2) 2026

Vatican pushes back on U.S. ambassador's understanding of Pope Leo's role in politics. The Vatican responded to a misrepresentation of the pope's role by the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, Brian Burch, by reaffirming that "the pope always speaks as a shepherd. Even when he speaks about war and peace, migration or how to remain human in the age of AI, the Successor of Peter remains, above all, a spiritual leader."

The Vatican was responding to Ambassador Burch, who was quoted in a *NYT* report, as saying that "when he spoke out against the (Iran) war, he was not doing so as the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, the vicar of Christ, but only as the sovereign political leader of the Vatican City state." Moreover, it quoted him as saying, "when the pope acts as the sovereign leader of the Holy See, he is coequal with world leaders."

Apparently, the Trump Administration took exception that the pope has come out against the Iran war (a.k.a. *Epic Fury*), judging it to be an unjust war. It was also reported that Burch was quoted as saying that "declaring the Iran war unjust is not a judgment the pope can make because he has access to only 'a set of limited facts.'" It added that Burch said that "even if the pope declared the war unjust, he didn't mean it."

Well, I guess it comes down to whom you believe: the Successor to Peter or a Trump spokesperson.

Looking at Catholics by Generation. Regarding Mass attendance, devotional practices, and retention, certain trends are starting to emerge among the oldest and youngest (adult) Catholics. Using the Pew Research Center's generational definitions—Silent Generation (born 1928-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996), and Generation Z (1997 onward)—the following trends emerge according to the *General Social Study (GSS)*:

“Mass attendance—at least once a month among the youngest group, Gen Z Catholics—was higher than it was for older Gen X or Baby Boomer Catholics.”

Retention rates—the percentage of adults raised Catholic who still identified as Catholic—also showed different trends. Among Baby Boomers, retention ranged from 68-62% from 2014 and 2024. Gen X varied from a high of 70% to a low of 60%. The trend for Millennials mirrors that of Gen X. For Gen Z, only 50% remained Catholic.

The largest numbers of Catholics are found in Baby Boomers who made up 33% of adult Catholics (17.2 M). This is followed by Gen X (25%/13.1 M), Millennials (24%/12.7 M), and Gen Z (13%/7.1 M). The Silent Generation makes up 5% of adult Catholics (2.8 M).

Black Catholics in the U.S. According to the GSS, while Blacks constitute about 10% of the U.S. population, 7.5% identify as Catholic or about 2.8 million individuals. The largest generational cohort is Millennials (43%), followed by Baby Boomers (22%), and Generation X (18%) and Gen Z (17%). The Silent Generation is barely represented at 1%. Although young adults reportedly make up a large segment of Black Catholics, they are not often seen at Mass.

Black Catholics do report a higher Mass attendance than the overall Catholic population: 40% versus 26% in weekly attendance.

The responses to religious/political/social questions differ significantly between Black Catholics and their white counterparts. Regarding the following statements, we have:

- White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin: Black (80% agreed), White (38% agreed).
- Racial problems in the U.S. are rare: Black (14%), White (36%).
- Irish, Italians, Jews, and many other minority groups overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special consideration: Black (39%), White (64%).

- Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class: Black (74%), White (32%).
- I resent when Whites deny the existence of racial discrimination: Black (76%), White (30%).
- Whites get away with offenses that African Americans would never get away with: Black (76%), White (30%).
- Whites do not go to great lengths to understand the problems African Americans face: (Black 74%), White (30%).

Who Believes in Heaven and Hell? Researcher Ryan Burge of Washington University in St. Louis, MO studied where members of various religious communities stood on such questions as the existence of heaven and hell. Overall Catholic responses were 71% agreed to both, neither one (11%), and heaven only (18%). Catholics who attend Mass regularly agreed at a higher rate (92%).

Most religiously affiliated believe that people have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body: Evangelical Protestants (98%), Mormons (97%), Black Protestants (97%), Catholics (95%), Buddhists (91%), Muslims (90%), Orthodox Christians (88%), Jews (75%), Agnostics (69%), and Atheists (33%).

Most Catholics condone euthanasia. Contrary to Church teaching, the majority of Catholics (60%) do not think that patients choosing to end their lives with the help of a doctor is morally wrong, according to the Pew Research Center. That percentage mirrors the prevailing view of most Americans (also at 60% approval).

A look at our new priests. The priestly ordination class of 2026 reached a total of 428 ordinands which is about a 6% increase from last year's class. The CARA survey along with USCCB Secretariat of Clergy showed the following:

Race/Ethnicity and Culture.

- 62% are white, 17% Hispanic, 11% Asian, 5% Black.
- 35% are foreign born.

Education and Work Experience.

- 45% attended Catholic elementary school, high school (38%), and college (34%).
- 61% completed an undergraduate or graduate degree before entering seminary, often majoring in philosophy/theology, engineering, business, science, or math.
- 64% had full-time work experience, most commonly in Church ministry/parish life.

Family background.

- 93% were baptized as babies.
- 86% said both parents were Catholic.
- 28% had a relative who was a priest or religious.

Vocational discernment.

- Prayer practice: 81% participated in Adoration on a regular basis, 70% prayed the rosary, 52% participated in a prayer/Bible study group, and 48% engaged in *Lectio Divina*.
- Group activities: 64% participated in a parish youth group, 31% in campus ministry, 31% in Boy Scouts, 29% in Knights of Columbus, and 27% in young adult group.
- Parish ministries: 79% served as altar servers, 49% as lectors, 35% as EMs, and 32% as catechists.
- Who encouraged them?: 70% were encouraged by a parish priest, a friend (49%), their mother (46%), or a parishioner (44%). Forty-one percent (41%) were discouraged by a friend or classmate or by a close relative.
- Formation: More than half said that the following formation activities contributed to their vocations: clinical pastoral education (52%), a priestly fraternity group (51%), and pastoral language immersion (45%).

