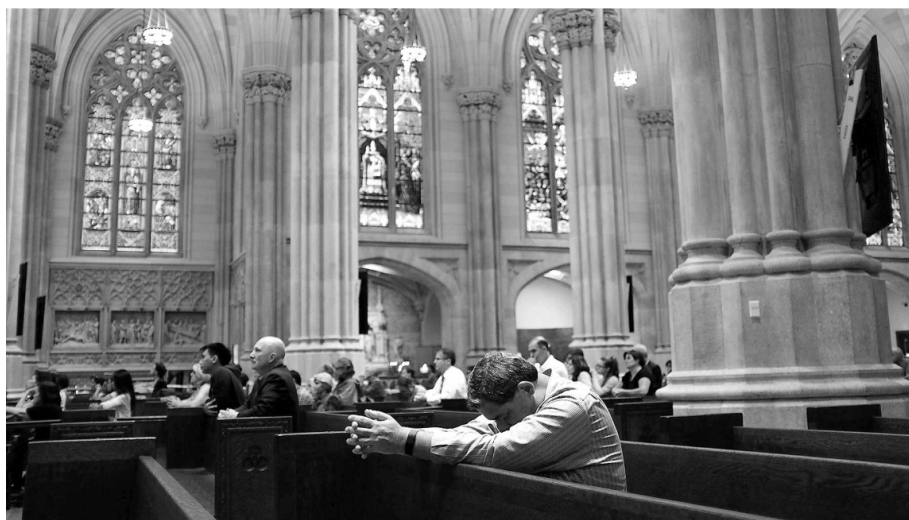




RELIGION MARCH 13, 2019

# Many U.S. Catholics Question Their Membership Amid Scandal

BY JEFFREY M. JONES



## STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- More Catholics questioning their membership than in 2002
- Nonpracticing Catholics most likely to reconsider their religion
- 59% confident in the priests at their church; 58% confident in Pope Francis

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- As the Catholic church responds to more allegations of sexual abuse of young people by priests, an increasing percentage of Catholics are re-examining their commitment to the religion. Thirty-seven percent of U.S. Catholics, up from 22% in 2002, say news of the abuse has led them to question whether they would remain in the church.

As a result of the recent news about sexual abuse of young people by priests, have you, personally, questioned whether you would remain in the Catholic church, or not?

	Yes, have questioned	No, have not
	%	%
2019	37	62
2002	22	76

Based on U.S. Catholics

GALLUP

These results are based on interviews with 581 U.S. Catholics who participated in Gallup polls Jan. 21-27 and Feb. 12-28. While the polling was being conducted, Pope Francis met with Catholic leaders from around the world at the Vatican to respond to a new wave of sex abuse allegations in numerous countries. The church dealt with a similar crisis in the U.S. in 2002, the last time Gallup polled about this. That polling came after *The*

*Boston Globe* reported on widespread abuse by Catholic priests in the Boston area and church leaders' efforts to prevent the abuse from becoming public knowledge.

Gallup's latest findings show that the current scandal is affecting U.S. Catholics more than the one in 2002 did, in terms of their feelings about the church. However, it is unclear whether Catholics who are questioning their church membership will actually decide to leave the church. Many Catholics may consider leaving the church but ultimately decide not to do so, or they may have no intention of leaving but simply be responding to this question as a way to express their frustration with the way the church has handled the problem.

Substantial minorities of both practicing and nonpracticing Catholics say they are questioning their commitment to the church -- but, as might be expected, those less committed to their religion are more likely to be questioning it. Whereas 46% of Catholics who seldom or never attend church say they have questioned whether they would remain in the faith, 37% of those who attend church on a monthly basis and 22% who attend weekly say the same.

The same pattern existed in 2002, although both practicing and nonpracticing Catholics are more likely now than in 2002 to be questioning their place in the church. Seventeen years ago, only one in eight weekly churchgoers were re-examining their membership, as were 24% of semi-regular churchgoers and 29% of infrequent ones.

#### Practicing Catholics Less Likely to Question Their Membership in the Church

As a result of the recent news about sexual abuse of young people by priests, have you, personally, questioned whether you would remain in the Catholic church, or not? (% Yes, have questioned)

	Attend church weekly	Attend nearly weekly/monthly	Seldom/Never attend
	%	%	%
2019	22	37	46
2002	12	24	29

Based on U.S. Catholics

GALLUP

There are no meaningful differences in the proportions of Catholics questioning their church membership by age or gender.

## Catholics Confident in Pope Francis, Their Own Priests

Amid the latest scandal, a majority of Catholics say they have either a great deal (40%) or quite a lot of confidence (18%) in Pope Francis. Similar percentages are confident in the priests at their church (41% a great deal, 18% quite a lot). Catholics are less confident in priests in the U.S. more generally, and in U.S. bishops and other Catholic leaders. About one in four U.S. Catholics say they have very little or no confidence in those two groups. One in eight have little or no confidence in Pope Francis or their own priests.

#### U.S. Catholics' Confidence in Catholic Church Leaders

Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each of the following -- a great deal, quite a lot, some or very little?

	A great deal	Quite a lot	Some	Very little/None
	%	%	%	%
The priests at your church	41	18	24	13
Pope Francis	40	18	28	13
Catholic priests in the U.S.	20	12	43	25
U.S. bishops and other Catholic leaders in this country	19	11	42	26

Based on U.S. Catholics; Jan. 21-27 and Feb. 12-28, 2019

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Catholics who attend church weekly are the most confident in all of these church leaders, and infrequent attendees are the least confident. The widest gaps in confidence appear with respect to the priests at their own church -- 86% of weekly churchgoers are confident in their own priests, compared with 39% of those who seldom or never attend church. The gaps are smallest with respect to Pope Francis; 18 percentage points separate the most committed (68%) and least committed Catholics (50%).

#### Confidence in Catholic Church Leaders, by Church Attendance

% Great deal/Quite a lot of confidence

	Attend church weekly %	Attend nearly weekly/monthly %	Seldom/Never attend %
The priests at your church	86	64	39
Pope Francis	68	61	50
Catholic priests in the U.S.	48	30	22
U.S. bishops and other Catholic leaders in this country	49	27	21

Based on U.S. Catholics; Jan. 21-27 and Feb. 12-28, 2019

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Women (65%) are more confident than men (51%) in Pope Francis, but the two genders are about equally confident in the other Catholic leaders asked about.

## Implications

While Pope Francis issued strongly worded statements against the abuse at the recent summit, many were hoping for more concrete steps aimed at preventing abuse, such as a zero tolerance policy for any priest who commits sexual abuse. The Vatican said it will issue guidelines for bishops on how to respond to cases, and U.S. church leaders are considering taking even stronger steps.

U.S. Catholics are still mostly confident in Pope Francis, but it could be argued that the 58% expressing confidence in him is somewhat weak given his role as leader of the Catholic church.

While it is uncertain how many of the 37% of U.S. Catholics who say they're questioning remaining in the church will actually leave in response to the latest sex abuse scandal, any loss of adherents is certainly not welcome news -- especially when the church is dealing with [larger societal trends moving away from formal religion](#). A decline in the number of Catholics would seem especially problematic if it were driven by practical matters such as how church leaders responded to a scandal rather than fundamental spiritual matters such as disagreement with church teachings or church members finding their faith to be unfulfilling.

Catholics shaken by the latest scandal could be affected in other ways besides leaving the church, including less frequent church attendance and being less willing to listen to church leaders' teachings on matters of faith.

[View complete question responses and trends.](#)

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